

Mano a Mano Formo Questo Cérchio
-Hand in Hand I form This circle-
A study of Modern Witches in Italy and Creation of a Community

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Men and women look for groups to which they can belong, certainly and forever, in a world in which all else is moving and shifting, in which nothing else is certain”.

(Eric Hobsbawm 1996: 40)

Modern Witches are practitioners of Wicca, a pagan religion. The practitioners call themselves ‘nature worshippers’, ‘pagans’ and ‘Witches’, thus playing with “forbidden” names in Western religious culture. Wicca is a new religion that continually attracts more and more individuals. This movement has been growing in Western Europe, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, South and Central America, and South Africa since the late 1960s. In this thesis I will describe how and explain why a growing number of young Italians, in particular young women, practice Wicca.

To study Wicca in Italy is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, Wicca was founded in a Protestant environment, and since Italy is a country with strong Catholic influences it makes for an interesting setting. Secondly, in Italy Wicca is a young, and still small, religion compared to in Britain and the USA. It will therefore be interesting to see the development of the movement in Italy.

The worship of nature is important, as are the belief in the Goddess and the God, with emphasis on the Goddess, although both are important since balance is an important concept of Wicca. Rituals are celebrated on so-called sabbats and esbats. Sabbats are rituals celebrated eight times a year following nature’s yearly cycle. Esbats are celebrated once a month when the moon is full, thirteen times a year.

The rituals are often called ‘magic’ or ‘magical acts’. Magic is practised in order to achieve harmony with nature, oneself, and others. Wicca is a religion for the individual; to empower oneself and take control of one’s own life in a world in transition. In this way Wicca creates meaning.

To become a Witch is both an active choice and a return to something you have always been. Many practitioners insist that they have never converted to Wicca since

Wicca is not presented as a religion one can convert to and join. Those practising Wicca often label themselves Witches, and this is believed to be something you are and have always been: You may only discover that you are a Witch. Often, when Witches discover Wicca, after searching for a new religion, they describe it as “it felt like coming home” and “finally I found a name for what I have always believed in”.

There are neither central organisations nor any churches in Wicca, and many practitioners practice alone or in groups called ‘covens’. Individuality characterises the pagan environment, and groups are formed and dissolved at a rapid rate. In this thesis I intend to depict how the Witches create and maintain a community and a sense of belonging despite the individuality that characterises pagans and the rapid rate of creation and dissolution of groups. ‘Community’, in the sociological meaning as a place or spatial network where people take care of each other and help each other, is not as common as it used to be. Individual freedom has become an important value in Western society, which makes it difficult for a traditional community to provide both security and the individual freedom that people demand. People practising Wicca form a community in the sense that the practitioners feel a sense of belonging even though they do not meet often, live together or spend a lot of time together. I will argue that the sense of belonging is created in different ways, in different forums and on different levels. The community is expressed and formed in different ways; such as through seasonal rituals, shared narratives, experiences and symbols, and the boundaries created between its members and non-practitioners. The community takes the form of networks that attend to the individual need for freedom and preserves the sense of belonging. I will argue that the practitioners of Wicca would create a community that provides a sense of belonging, maintains their autonomy and increases the possibility of living a meaningful life.

Other main concerns in this thesis are; why do these people search for something new? Why do they choose Wicca instead of other religious alternatives? How is this so called pagan worldview compatible with a modern view of the world, to what extent, and in what way? Wicca is an identity formed and created in the framework of modernity: Can it be seen as a critical response to the society they live in?

OUTLINE OF THIS THESIS

Before examining and describing how and why people practice Wicca, I will give a short introduction to Wicca and paganism, the history of the religion and a short insight into its practice. I will then continue with some background information on Italy such as its political history, the Church and Catholicism, religion, the role of women, and the current situation of the young, in order to depict the historical and social context of my informants. I will then give an account of the methods I employed during my fieldwork and describe the field, which is of an urban, complex and fluid character. As a theoretical framework I will outline aspects of Giddens' and Bauman's theories of modernity. Their perspectives are relevant because I will examine Wicca as a creative and critical response to modernity.

Part two begins with chapter six where I give an account of the religious practice of my informants. I will describe a sabbat ritual, Equinox, and the different elements of the rituals. I intend to examine the rituals as a place where socialising takes place by using the theories of Catherine Bell and Clifford Geertz. All participants perform rituals in similar ways and I will therefore argue the social and the symbolic value of rituals in creation of communities.

In chapter seven I will describe my informants' narratives of how they came to join Wicca, how they perceive themselves, what they see as important aspects of being a Witch, and the importance of magic as therapy. In other words; what does being a Witch involve? I also intend to examine how their narratives can lead to a sense of belonging.

In chapter eight I intend to depict and describe how a community, or a network, is created, despite most of my informants not having regular face-to-face interaction with each other. Anthony Cohen emphasises the symbolic construction of a community and I intend to show how the Witches create a symbolic and cognitive community with the use of different symbols.

In chapter nine I intend to show how boundaries are important in the creation of their identity as Witches. The boundaries are expressed through emphasising differences between Witches themselves, between Witches and other pagans, Witches and the Church, and between Witches and other non-believers. I will argue that it is the dialectic between insiders and outsiders of the community that is important in creating a sense of belonging and identity, both individual and collective.

Part One

2. WICCA

What is Wicca?

Paganism or neo-paganism¹ is a fast growing religious movement in the Western world. Paganism is an umbrella term for those who identify themselves as Witches, Druids, Goddess Worshipers, Neo-Shamans and various other forms of pagans.

Many practitioners of paganism claim that they worship pagan goddesses and gods and have retrieved beliefs and practices from pre-Christian times that are said to have been practised in an unbroken line to the present. According to a Wiccan priestess, Margot Adler (1986), their ancestors practised non-dogmatic religions, which were based purely on the celebrations of the seasonal cycles of nature. They were based more on what people did than on what they believed in. In Wicca and paganism there are no dogmas in terms of propositions. However, some basic beliefs are shared by practitioners: the body is holy, nature is holy, the world is holy, sexuality is holy, each living creature is holy, and the divinity is immanent in nature. One important and basic sentence is the Wiccan rede; 'Do as thou will as long as thou hurt none' (Adler 1986).

One of the central aspects of Wiccan beliefs is the symbol of the Goddess and her consort, the Horned God. The Goddess is the symbol of the principles of life and growth, and the God is the symbol of death, decay, and change. Wicca is a polytheistic religion and, according to modern practitioners, all named goddesses in the world are believed to be an aspect of the Goddess, just as all the named gods are believed to be an aspect of the Horned God (Jencson 1989). The goddess and the god are conceived of in numerous ways with inspiration from the whole world and across history. Practitioners are eclectic. They mix and choose from different pantheons of gods and goddesses retrieved from

¹ Some call this religious movement neo-paganism to distinguish it from the religions practised in pre-Christian times. Others call this new religion paganism. I will in this thesis call it paganism and merely use the notion to refer to the pagan religions practised today.

different ancient pre-Christian mythologies such as the Greek, the Egyptian, the Roman, the Nordic, the Celtic, and others of our ancient heritage. Wiccans also collect different beliefs from Native American religions and other polytheistic nature religions.

There are, as already mentioned, two main ritual cycles. These are the sabbats and the esbats. The eight sabbats are connected to the solar cycle and the god, and they represent the changing of nature in the yearly cycle. At these rituals the Wiccans pay respect to those life forces that change with the season: death, birth, growth and decay.

The eight solar sabbats are as follows: Spring Equinox or Ostara, midsummer, Autumn Equinox, Yule, Imbolc or Candlemas, Beltane or May Eve, Lughnasadh or Lammas Eve, and Samhain or Halloween. Imbolc, Beltane, Lughnasadh and Samhain are all connected to the Celtic agricultural calendar². Each of the sabbats has its own purpose, which is connected to the changes in the natural cycle of the seasons. According to Vivian Crowley, a British Wiccan high-priestess, sabbats are connected to a mythical background: Spring Equinox celebrates the mating of the goddess and the god; Belthane celebrates the coming of summer and the marriage of the goddess and the god; Midsummer is the celebration of the sun. The sun is seen as the Lord of Life, and Midsummer celebrates the coming of god and his maturity and kingship; Lammas celebrates the harvest, the sacrifice of the god and his death and when he dies he goes to the underworld; The Autumn Equinox celebrates the return of the god from the underworld. He reclaims his queen and brings her to the underworld; Samhain is the feast of the dead. This is the time when the worlds of the living and dead are close to each other; Yule celebrates the young sun god; and at Imbolc the god releases his queen from the underworld and she may come back to the world as a queen once more (Crowley 1996).

The thirteen esbats are connected to the moon and the goddess, and are celebrated when the moon is full. When the moon is full the energy is at its peak because the goddess is then available and close. When the moon is waxing the energy is rising and is

² See appendix 3 for a figure of the yearly cycle of sabbats.

positive, and when the moon is waning the energy is believed to be restrictive and inward.

The world, according to pagans and Witches, is made of energy, matter, and spirit, and the work of magic is to manipulate the energy. “Magic” is an important aspect of the practice of Wicca and is performed in rituals. It is defined as the conscious manipulation of energies and as a way to induce necessary change in individuals and in the world. Everything is connected, which in turn makes magic possible.

The belief that everything is energy is also reflected in other aspects of the Witches’ worldview. Witches believe in reincarnation, and when we die it is the spirit that will be reincarnated. This belief in incarnation in Wicca is similar to the view on incarnation in Buddhism. Both the spirit and the body are reincarnated. When humans die the body takes part in the cycle of nature and the energy is reincarnated. Our spirit goes to a place “in between” and waits there in order to be reincarnated. Humans are not reincarnated only on the earth: There are also other levels and dimensions where one can be reborn.

Balance is an important aspect of Wicca and a key to the Wiccan worldview. According to Greenwood (2000), who has studied magicians in Britain, good and evil are, for magicians, “joined together in a dialectic process that creates a greater cosmic unity”. There are, consequently, no evil spirits nor any other wickedness that humans have to fight. Since everything consists of different energies and opposites (feminine and masculine energy, positive and negative energy etc.), harmony and balance are a natural goal.

As a consequence of the belief that everything is made of the same energy, closeness to nature is a central aspect of Wicca. Due to the belief that the divinities are immanent (dwelling in everything), both nature and humans take part in the divine, and the divine is also manifested in nature: Everything is connected.

In a ritual, the spirits of the four quarters (the four cardinal compass points) and the four elements (air, earth, fire and water) are called in order to protect the ritual and its participants from negative energies, and also to participate with their powers. The four

elements are linked to the four quarters. Earth is connected to the north, air is connected to the east, fire to the south, and water to the west. They are also believed to possess different human attributes or qualities. For instance, according to Cunningham³, fire is linked to transformation, passion, change, success, health, and strength. Water is associated with emotions, the psychic mind, love, healing, beauty, and emotional spirituality. Earth is seen as the stabilising, fertile, and nourishing element. And finally, air is the element of the mind, of communication, movement, divination, and ascetic spirituality (Cunningham 2003).

Colours are also linked to different human qualities, the elements and the four directions. The colour of the candles used in rituals is important and depends on the purpose of the ritual and the magical work to be performed. For instance, green is a colour associated with and used in love magic. White is used to clean the air and is also associated with success. In this way each colour signifies different aspects of human life. The incense used in rituals is incense that is worked on magically beforehand or prepared especially for certain effects. There is incense for love, success, creativity, and other qualities that are wished for.

Both men and women practice Wicca. When rituals are performed in covens one or two of the participants will act as the leader of the ritual. In this role she is called the high-priestess, or, if a man, a high-priest. The high-priestess and the high-priest only lead the ritual. They are not considered an authority with unique access to the goddess and the gods. Each individual has direct contact with the divine, and no third person is needed in order to talk to the deities, unlike in Catholicism. Everyone can be a high-priestess or a high-priest in rituals. Wicca is a non-authoritative religion, so the high-priestess and the high-priest are only the leading individuals of the ritual. However, there are individuals that are looked upon as authorities, without holding positions of power. Especially those who have practiced Wicca for a long time and have achieved more experience than others are often looked up to. However, individuality is an important aspect of Wicca and the

³ Scott Cunningham is a practitioner who writes introductory books for Wiccans. He is widely read among my informants.

main focuses of this religion are inner growth and development of the self. Everyone interprets the goddesses and gods in ways that for them feels natural, and rituals are performed in order to satisfy one's own needs and to ensure one's own comfort.

Wicca is also called modern Witchcraft. Many practitioners, both men and women, call themselves Witches because they believe that those who were burned on the stake during the Inquisition practised an old pre-Christian religion, like themselves. They want to remember the victims of the Inquisition and they see the witch as a symbol of a female hero who dares to defy the accepted norms of what a woman is, and to go against the powerful institutions of society (Salomonsen 2002).

However, Witchcraft is a label that brings a lot of negative connotations and associations, and this the practitioners intend to change. Within neo-pagan circles 'witch' is taken to describe an individual with power. Among Witches themselves it is common to believe that the word 'witch' is derived from the Old English *Wik*, which means to bend or shape. Witches are therefore individuals who can bend or shape reality and they do this with the help of magic (Berger 1999). The Witch is seen as a person who is wise and committed to the worship of nature and the goddess within; the immanent life force. It is proclaimed as a name for religious worship and not as a polluted and negatively loaded name (Salomonsen 2002).

The great number of books and Internet sites explaining rituals, spells and other teachings, which traditionally were only taught in covens, make it possible to be self-taught. To initiate oneself as a Witch is both common and accepted.

In the US, the most widely read introductory book to Wicca is Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance*, which by 1989 had sold 100 000 copies and by the year 2000 this number had passed 300 000 (Salomonsen 2002:9). *The Spiral Dance* was translated to Italian in 2002 before which the book was hardly known by Italian Witches. The most popular introductory books among Italian Witches are Scott Cunningham's *Wicca. A Guide For the Solitary Practitioner*, which was translated to Italian in 2001, and Phyllis Currot's *The Book of Shadows*, translated in 1999. Now, there is a growing number of books, English and American ones translated into Italian, and one Italian author has written an

introductory book about Wicca. There are also other articles such as Wicca school-diaries with spells and ritual calendars. This growing number of both books and other goods indicates that there is a market for Wicca in Italy.

The history of and influences on Wicca

Wicca is a constructed religion, influenced by different sources. As it develops, new traditions are created. It is a new religion and it is a mystical religion; a religion where mystical experiences play the most important role in terms of understanding nature, learning about the divine, and becoming a religiously devoted person.

The English civil servant Gerald Gardner is seen as the founder and creator of Wicca. In the 1950s he published *Witchcraft Today* (1954) and *The meaning of Witchcraft* (1959). In these books he claimed to be initiated into a coven of witches practicing a religion and rituals with roots in a pre-Christian fertility cult. He claimed to be initiated as a high-priest by “Old Dorothy”, and when she died Doreen Valiente was initiated as high-priestess and as Gardner’s co-worker. Gardner himself claims only to have reconstructed the rituals practised by the coven he was initiated into, and not to have reinvented rituals practised by the pre-Christian fertility cult (Jencson 1989, Hutton 1999, Berger 1999, Salomonsen 2002).

A British occultist, Alistair Crowley⁴, and his writings on rituals, influenced Gardner’s work, as did Margaret Murray, an Egyptologist and folklorist, and her *The Witch cult in Western Europe* (1921). She argued that the witches persecuted in the Middle Ages and Renaissance Europe were practitioners of European religions and fertility cults practising a pre-Christian religion. Instead of being rooted out by Christians Gardner claimed that they survived, and that it was them he was drawing attention to and their fertility cult and its rituals and beliefs (Hutton 2000).

⁴ The writings of Alistair Crowley have influenced many rituals. With material from Greek, Roman and Jewish texts, Renaissance alchemy, Egyptian and Asian religious traditions mixed with Old world magic and astrology, he created an occult group performing ceremonial magic (Pike 2001).

A third source that influenced Gardner was Charles Godfrey Leland, a folklorist that worked with and among Gypsies and folk-witches of Tuscany, England and Eastern Europe. His primary work was *Aradia* (Leland 1899), a book about witches from Tuscany and the Goddess Aradia, who sent her daughter Diana to the earth to teach people witchcraft (Jencson 1989).

When paganism was transported to the USA different schools and branches with both feminist and non-feminist characteristics developed (Salomonsen 2002). Various aspects of American culture influenced Wicca in the 1960s and 1970s, such as feminism, the counter culture, the environmental movement and American individualism. (Berger 2003).

In contrast to the American groups the small groups of contemporary pagans in Britain appear to focus more on socio-political changes and not so much on self-developing techniques and philosophy. The spiritual rejection of established social attitudes is stronger in Britain. The religious focus is more on the Celtic traditions and a connection with nature and surviving forms of ancient folklore (Simes 1995: 180). In Britain Wicca had been dominated by secrecy, hierarchy and formal elements of ceremonial magic. These aspects became less pronounced in the USA. Publications of manuals on how to practice diminished the secrecy that was important in British Wiccan covens (Berger 2003).

Both men and women practise Wicca, yet there are more female than male adherents. There are groups that are all-women groups and groups that include both men and women. It is impossible to know exactly how many pagans and Witches there are because of the secrecy of participants, but in the United States Helen Berger estimates the number to be between 150,000 and 200,000 (Berger 1999). Luhrmann (1989) suggested several thousand in Britain in 1989, and York (1995) refers to a census from 1989 that suggests that there are 250,000 Witches and pagans in the UK. But as pointed out by Greenwood it is very difficult to estimate an exact number (Greenwood 2000).

In Milan in 1993 a public meeting was held to introduce Wicca as a religion to anyone interested (Introvigne & Ambrosio 1997). My research suggests that this is the

first public knowledge of the presence of Wicca in Italy. Before 1993 a feminist Wicca had been mentioned in the Italian feminist movement's papers from time to time, but there were probably few organised groups of Wicca until 1993. Groups of other forms of paganism, such as the Temple of Isis and Druids, have existed for a longer time in Italy (Introvigne & Ambrosio 1997), probably since the 1970s. Some of my informants pointed out that many practitioners argue that they are born Witches, but the first people probably started to label themselves "Wiccan" in the late 1980s or the early 1990s. Wicca attained a more general presence in Italy in the late 1990s.

It is not possible to give an exact number of how many Wicca practitioners there are in Italy due to lack of academic research. However, based on information from my informants and from participation on workshops and conferences, an educated guess would be between 700 and 1000. A significant proportion of these are most likely teenagers. This estimated figure must be used with caution since many Wiccans practice their religion in secret.

3. ITALY

"[P]erhaps the time has now come to acknowledge that Italy is not an anomaly[...] and that a homogeneous national culture is as elusive in Italy as it is in most other Western states, which have to contend with social fragmentation, ethnic divisions, spatial subcultures and differing economic structures" (Bull 2001:58).

Introduction

Wicca is not of Italian origin and is practised in many different countries on different continents. The collected knowledge of the religion is spread through books, workshops, and the Internet. The practice of the religion will therefore be similar all over the world. However, I propose that due to different social contexts there are local expressions of this emergent global religion. In order to review Wicca in the Italian setting some background information is necessary.

Firstly, I will give a short general review of Italian history since the unification in 1860. Another important aspect of Italian culture is the Catholic Church which I also review below. The Church has played an important role throughout Italian history both in politics and in other aspects of Italian culture and values. I will give an outline of the religiosity of the Italian people today, both in regard to the Catholic faith and other religions. Then I will briefly look at the historical position of women in Italian society. Since most of my informants are young women and many joined Wicca when they were 15-17 years old, it is relevant to give an outline of the general conditions for young people in Italy.

General history

The unification of Italy, *Il Risorgimento*, was accomplished in 1860. Even though the country was geographically united, it was not unified in areas such as politics, economy, and language. Only two percent of the population had the right to vote, so the parliament of the new Italian State was governed on the premises of the ruling class, which was also the group in Italian society that wanted the unification (Sassoon 1997).

The Pope did not give his consent to the unification, and consequently, Catholics were banned from taking an active part in politics. Before the First World War the ruling class constituted the only political party. After the war more political parties appeared and the trade unions became stronger. More voices than just the elite were heard in the governing of the Italian State. After the elections in 1919 a political crisis arose because neither of the elected parties could form a coalition due to a disparity in norms and values⁵. The *Partito Popolare* (pre-Fascist party (Anna Cento Bull 2001) was anti-socialist and the Socialist Party was anti-clerical (Sassoon 1997). Fascism became the solution to the political crisis. During the Fascist regime all non-fascist organisations were banned except AC, *Azzione Cattolica*, constituted on Catholic values and tied to the Catholic Church. This in turn gave the Church more political power. In October 1922, Mussolini rose to power, and from then up until 1938 the Fascists were popular among intellectuals in Italy. This changed when Mussolini formed a coalition with Hitler. The intellectuals now turned against Mussolini and joined the Resistance movement and fought against him in the Second World War. The Resistance movement was organised by different political parties; the Communist Party (PCI), the Socialist Party (PSI) and the Christian Democratic Party (DC). After the war these political parties were the only political structures to survive (Sassoon 1997). The DC was politically moderate and its leaders had been trained in Catholic organisations. They therefore received the full support of the Vatican, which in turn gave the Catholic Church and the Vatican political power (Bull 2001).

⁵ The *Partito Popolare* obtained 20.5 per cent and the Socialist Party obtained 32.4 percent.

The PSI was the biggest party and therefore the only one in position to create a government. However, due to low support they were not able to govern alone. The Party first went into a coalition with the PCI, but by 1963 they had become part of a DC-led governing coalition and became a junior version of the DC. The Vatican supported the DC, so the Catholic Church and the Vatican got political power by influencing the governing party. The DC stayed in power continually for almost fifty years.

The Church and Catholicism

The Church has influenced Italian culture, values and norms for centuries, and continues to be a great influence on political and cultural life in Italy. Because of this the Church still has formative power on Italian mentality and values, and it is therefore important in order to describe the social context of my informants. However, the Church as a political actor is a mixture of tradition and modernity. The Pope has upheld traditional positions on matters such as contraception, celibacy for the clergy, ordination of women, abortion, and divorce, and at the same time tried to adapt to modernisation (Allum 2001).

The Church's major concerns from unification to the Second Vatican Council (1963-65) were the value of property, the family and the subordination of women, the myth of the land, the acceptance of one's social status and the virtue of obedience. Another concern was the criticism of atheists, Communists and sinners. These concerns were expressed in different public literature with the purpose of showing that there was no moral alternative to the Christian way of life. The family was seen as the natural condition both for men and women, determining the essentially different, but complementary roles of men and women. The man should be lord and the master; the woman should be maid and servant (Allum 2001).

“A woman's role was that of mother and husband's helpmate, with the attendant virtues of modesty, submission and sacrifice. The role model was Mary, who suffered silently and with dignity. For women, there were no Christian virtues outside the family”

(Allum 2001: 103).

Two other values emphasised by the Church were the acceptance of one's position in life and the virtue of obedience to God's will. One should support the social status quo and reject other ideologies, especially the secular. The Pope was to be regarded as the only true interpreter of God's will due to his position as the leader of the Church (Allum 2001).

During the Fascist and Cold War periods these ecclesiastical values influenced and determined the political and cultural orientation of the majority of Italians. An impact commented on by historians (Allum 2001).

Because the DC was viewed positively with regard to patriotism and religion, it won the elections in the 1950s. The Communist Party lost because Catholics judged it as atheist. In more secularised and working-class areas critical attitudes towards the DC were found. Two forms of critical attitudes seemed to dominate. One was a total rejection of religion in the form of anti-clericalism. The other was an acceptance of the Catholic cultural framework, albeit only by interpreting official judgements flexibly and in a manner that suited them (Allum 2001). Even if a large proportion of the population was Catholic there were also parts of the population that did not support the Church.

By the 1960s Italy was no longer a Catholic country in one sense: Those who actually practised Catholicism had become a minority. This was partly due to the victory of rival ideologies, such as Communist movements, Feminist movements, and Ecological movements (Allum 2001). Due to this the Church was in crisis from the 1960s to the 1980s. In the period before the Second Vatican Council (1963) the Church was losing contact with ordinary men and women because they were not as faithful as they had previously been. The Second Vatican Council proposed a change in the Church in order to win back the people turning away from the Church, but the Vatican administration did not agree.

Catholic culture in the pre-Second Vatican Council period (before 1963) was dominated by numerous, widespread Catholic institutions such as the ecclesiastic territorial institutions and networks of Catholic associations. Among these were the

Catholic Action (*Azzione Cattolica*, AC)⁶ and numerous professional institutions like the Farmers' Confederation, the Association of Catholic Workers, the Trade Union Confederation, and the DC. A Catholic press sold and distributed half of all the magazines sold in Italy. The DC was continuously in power. Therefore the Vatican and the Church could count on public institutions such as schools, radio and television to spread the Catholic teaching and the precepts of Catholic culture (Allum 2001).

The adherents of AC and other Catholic associations declined by two thirds in the five years from 1966-1971. The development of numerous grass-roots communities, due to lay Catholic protest against Church authorities, led to the loss of the Church's credibility. Lay Catholics were protesting against the ecclesiastic hierarchy, and a general fragmentation of both the organisation and culture of the Catholic movement began. The Catholic dissent reached its peak when the Church voted against the law for legal divorce in the 1974 referendum. However, the Church authorities managed to regain some of its previous institutional control over cultural dissent in the religious sphere by systematic elimination of dissent towards the Church authorities and through accepting some of the criticism of the Church regarding submission to Church authority (Allum 2001).

The Catholic cultural area seems to have stabilised by the 1990s. Social scientists have identified two main groups of Catholics, a majority one and a minority one. The majority, about two-thirds of Italians, accept the generic definition of Catholic, while the minority are strongly religious and comprise perhaps one-third of the Italian population (Allum 2001).

The Church tried to adapt to the modern world after the Second Vatican Council by emphasising the ethical dimension of the Christian message rather than the purely cultic. The Catholic morality was presented in a persuasive manner as a valid response to contemporary social problems. However, it has never turned its back on those dogmas claimed by Pope Paul II; the claim of universal truth and that all modern philosophies such as Liberalism, Socialism, Naturalism, Pantheism etc are false. Most Italians,

⁶ It consisted of three million members in the 1950s (Allum 2001: 104)

however, disagree with this claim. A measure of this change can be traced in the fact that the DC disappeared after the Cold War (Allum 2001).

Although Catholicism is not associated with, or organised as, a single political body anymore, it is still a force in the Italian society. The future of the Church is more likely to be a campaigning organisation instead of a political one; influencing the political and moral values of Italian culture (Sassoon 1997).

Religiosity in Italy today

I will now depict the wider religiosity in Italy to give a picture of the frames of reference and social context of my informants.

Of the 57 321 070⁷ Italians, over 95 % are baptised and 88% say they believe in God. About one third of Italians declare that they are Catholics even though they do not necessarily attend church regularly or follow all the teachings of the tradition. Only 6% of Italians can be classed as truly devoted, meaning that they rigidly practice their religion in their daily life, and only one third of these 6% attend mass every day. Many Italians say that they believe in God, but they do not believe in the Catholic teachings (Hopkins 2002). Another survey indicates that it is young people from the upper and the middle classes who are most likely to become active Catholics (Introvigne & Ambrosio 1997).

Some non-practising Italian Catholics, and even agnostics, like to believe in miracles, protection by saints and the healing power of weeping Madonnas (Hopkins 2002). In addition to this there are also other forms of folk beliefs such as the evil eye, vampires, she-devils, and good and bad witches. A central part of religious practises are the saints and their cults. The Madonna, Virgin Mary, is often seen as a saint because the Mary cult is similar to the cults of other saints. Religious practitioners pray to Maria or one of the other saints and ask them to intercede with God on their behalf (Delamont 1995).

⁷ <http://demo.istat.it/pop2003/index.html>

Every Italian city and each little town or village has their own patron saint who protects the city and its habitants. Each saint has his or her own day of celebration. On the fourth of October when the saint of Bologna, *San Petrino*, was celebrated, masses were held all day long in all the churches in the city. The number of participants varied, but in the evening they held one main mass in the church of the saint, the Cathedral. It was not only packed inside the cathedral but crowds were gathered outside, too. After the mass there was a procession around *Piazza Maggiore*, the main square, by the Cathedral.

About 2% of the Italian population belong to some other faith community than Catholicism. Islam, due to increased immigration, is the leading religion after Christianity. After Catholicism, within Christianity, Jehovah's Witnesses claim almost half a million converts, making them the second largest spiritual group after the Catholic community. Among other Christian denominations to be found in the Italian community are the Lutheran Church, the Pentecostal churches (with more than 250 000 followers), and the Evangelists. Other religions represented in the Italian population are Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism (represented by Hare Krishna groups) (Hopkins 2002). New Age and other spiritual movements are growing in Italy (Introvigne & Ambrosio 1997). Protestant charismatic movements, for instance, hierarchical Pentecostalism and The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, led by charismatic leaders, are gaining terrain among the poor and marginalized in Mediterranean and Catholic countries.

According to the theologian Berge Furre (2004) this growth is a result of the churches' ability to provide people with solutions for coping with daily life. It is possible for people to come to this or that church with their problems, such as unsatisfactory situations that make life a struggle. In Pentecostal movements, instead of taking control of their own life, people hand this control over to a priest or a charismatic leader. In Brazil, the Universal Church has experienced explosive growth. According to Berge Furre and Mary Esperandio the solutions are often based on money. People give money to the church in order for the priest to pray on their behalf. If the situation does not improve one can pay more money for the priest to pray again (Furre 2004). Wicca is a response to some of the same concerns; how to cope with daily life and how to create

meaning. So why not choose Pentecostalism or a charismatic version of New Age religion? Why do they choose Wicca as an alternative to Catholicism? Wicca represents a very different alternative because there are no charismatic leaders and no authoritative priests. Instead of passing control over one's own life to a priest, one aims to find a way to cope; and one takes control by doing magic. According to Amy Simes, Wicca is a religion that has room for individual creativity. It is a modern spiritual trend and a religion for a modern world that is in transition (Simes 1995). She claims that:

“As a religion of paradox [Wicca] is reflective of the modern era, encouraging social behaviour alongside individual creativity. It is a religion of unusual combinations, influenced by the society around it, but selective and self-authoritative of what deems acceptable. As a new religious movement it is indicative of a modern spiritual trend which supports and encourages individuality without denying a need for communities within society. It is a religion for a modern world in transition.”

(Simes 1995:188, my brackets)

And this, I propose, is one of the reasons why people choose Wicca instead of other religious alternatives; that Wicca is a religion which gives the practitioners the feeling of having the ability to be in control of their every day lives, and not being dependent on someone else. It is also, as maintained by Simes, a religion that allows for individuality without denying a need for community within the society they live in. Wicca can be seen as a rebellion against the hierarchical thoughts of the Catholic Church and male dominated society.

The occult in Italy

To believe in the occult and in other alternative beliefs is not regarded as strange in Italy. There are estimated to be about 50 000 *maghi* (fortune-tellers, tarot card readers, astrologers, clairvoyants, sensitives, magicians, reiki etc) who offer their services in Italy (Hopkinson 2002). Their services are advertised on television, in the newspapers, in the yellow pages, in handouts, etc. Even though the south is renowned as being more

superstitious than the north, almost half of the *maghi* operate in the north. The rest are divided between the south and the middle regions. The estimated number of Italians using *maghi* is 10 million; 58 % are women, 38% men and 4% children. The majority of these use only astrologers. They either want to know the future or want help in love or against the evil-eye (Hopkinson 2002).

My informant, Simone, who is a male Witch, operates as a *maghi*. He is consulted by individuals who need emotional or mental help. His main working tool is ritual, and he works with specific energies or divinities, depending on the nature of the problem in question. According to him, Witches differs from the *maghi* in that Witches have a religion and a faith. The *maghi* does not; she or he only does magic.

According to Simone, the *maghi* cheat their customers and this is unfortunate because as a consequence, people will be sceptical towards Witches. It may also create prejudice and bring negative connotations to magic and Witches.

As mentioned above, of all the different services offered by *maghi*, astrology is the most popular. Also in public arenas there exists an obvious interest in astrology. Every morning on a television show, an astrologer recounts the horoscope for the day for each sign of the zodiac. Also in the newspapers one can read the daily horoscopes.

In Bologna there is a magic shop which sells a variety of magical commodities such as candles, oils and talismans for love and success, and objects that are supposed to work against the evil eye, etc. I was told by the owner of the shop, a woman in her fifties, that all kinds of people come to the shop. Some ask for advice about how to manage different problems, buy oils or candles as precautions or as means to deal with positive or negative things, or buy an amulet or a talisman. Others would like to learn how to perform a ritual or a spell.

General interest in the occult is great in Italy. Television shows talk about different occult and esoteric religions. At least two television shows have been dedicated to Wicca. Once a week, on a program on one of the main channels, different parapsychological phenomena and different religions such as New Age, etc., are discussed.

During the summer of 2002 a weekly event in Bologna was called “*Bologna Magica. Passegiare nei misteri magici della città*”, “Magical Bologna. Walks through the magical mysteries of the city”. The event itself was a guided tour arranged on Thursday nights every second week. Anyone who wanted to go on this walk could buy a ticket and join the group. The group was taken around the city to different places, each connected to stories of a magical or occult character such as alchemy, astrology, and the witch trials of the Middle Ages. The normal attendance for these tours was between 20 and 30 people.

The already existing widespread belief in witches, magic and saints, and the anti-clerical culture might make the step to Wicca easier than if these things were not already a part of many people’s beliefs. In Wicca divination techniques are used such as astrology, tarot cards and runes, which non-practitioners also find intriguing and interesting. On many occasions I observed people offering tarot card readings and palm reading in the streets.

Women and family structure

Since most of my informants and the majority of practitioners of Wicca are women I consider it important to provide some background information on the situation and position in society of women. I will thus describe family structure and women’s role in the family and in society.

During the rule of the Fascist regime both the Church and the State emphasised the value of the family in Italian society, in order to stabilise society and maintain that stability. They also emphasised that a woman’s place, as the homemaker and carer for the children, was in the family (Wood & Farrel 2001).

After the Second World War both the fertility rate declined and family sizes decreased. Families were transformed from being extended families living together to being couples, couples with children, couples where the children had left home and people living alone⁸. More women attended universities, and this resulted in higher

⁸ The average number of individuals in a family went down from “3,9 persons in 1951 to 3,2 in 1976 and 2,8 in 1991 (3,1 in the South) the concurrent decrease in the average number on income earners in the

competition between women and men in a number of occupations. A consequence of this was an increased complexity in women's role in society and their relation to it. Women's role was no longer only tied to the home; they had to find their place in society. This also happened in other Western countries but much earlier and at a faster pace. It was not until the 1980s that the employment rate of women in Italy had become roughly equal to that of other western countries (Sassoon 1997).

Previously it was the family that provided services such as childcare and taking care of the old, but as the extended family declined, the welfare state grew and took over these services. When the welfare state failed to provide the anticipated services women were expected to make up for it, and they became an unpaid 'agents' for the welfare state (Sassoon 1997).

Two factors distinguish Italy from the rest of Europe regarding the pace of these changes; firstly, a decreasing fertility rate and secondly, young people who live with their parents for a long time. In 1991, 80 % of Italian youth aged between 15 and 29 lived at home. Only Spain has the same high rate as this. This is due to high unemployment among the young, chronic housing shortages, and more people choosing to study at university due to the ease of entry. Studying has become an alternative to finding a job. Yet, by becoming students young Italians become economically dependent upon their family because there is no available financial aid such as student loans or grants (Sassoon 1997).

Since many young Italians live at home longer, they need solidarity groups other than those based on family. Influences such as urbanisation, migration, disruption of traditional patterns and influences of foreign models of behaviour have also contributed to the development of new solidarity groups based on age (Sassoon 1997). Since many of the practitioners of Wicca in Italy are young and live at home, the development of Wicca may be seen as a response to this change in Italian demographics and a way to construct

family (from 2,3 in 1900 to 1,7 in 1951 to 1,5 in 1961 and 1,2 in 1971 to 1,1 in 1976)" (Sassoon 1997: 108).

new solidarity groups based on interest instead of family. It will then become a way to find and create one's own identity.

Summary

I have now given a short survey of the historical context, both political and religious, of my informants. The Church has influenced Italian society for many years, politically and culturally, in terms of norms and values. The number of Italians following the Church has declined and during the period from the 1960s to the 1980s the Church experienced a crisis because it lost many followers and was unable to connect with ordinary people. The Church tried to adapt to the modern world but maintained its claim to universal truth, being against abortion and legal divorce. However, most Italians do not support these notions. After almost fifty years of political power the DC lost support and disappeared after the cold war. The DC was supported by the Vatican and the Catholic Church, and it was through the political power of the DC that the Church influenced the governing of Italy and was able to spread Catholic norms and values in the society.

Both the Church and the Fascists have emphasised the role of women as wives and mothers and thereby kept women politically subordinated. These influences left traces in Italians' attitudes towards women, which could in turn explain why the development of women's rights and women's participation in the labour market arrived later in Italy than in other Western countries.

Family structures have changed. The average number of members in a family and the fertility rate decreased, which led to a more complex role for women. However, the role of women has changed and they have achieved greater equality with men when it comes to education and employment. Additionally, women's social status has changed even though Italian society is still male dominated.

Italians are generally religious although most of them do not identify with Catholic morality, practices and beliefs. They use *maghi*, astrology and tarot cards, they

believe in witches and the evil eye, and they are relatively open to magic such as spells, amulets etc.

There are various alternative religions and spiritual faiths to Catholicism, both charismatic and non-charismatic. Protestant charismatic movements are growing in Mediterranean and Catholic countries as a consequence of people needing to be able to cope with a hard and unsatisfying everyday. Wicca can also be seen as a way to cope with existence; by creating meaning and providing a feeling of control. It is also a religion that emphasises creative individuality, something opposed by other alternatives. I suggest, therefore, that one reason why people choose Wicca is due to a need for freedom and the need for control over one's own life; and not to be submissive to a charismatic leader.

4. Method

Background for my fieldwork and choice of site

I lived in Bologna for six months, from July 2002 to January 2003, in order to conduct fieldwork. In March 2003 I returned for two weeks to participate in a weekend workshop for magicians.

There are not as yet any permanent or visible Wiccan communities in Italy, so I chose Bologna primarily for three practical reasons. I already had two contacts there, Maria and Simona, established via e-mail during the spring of 2002. Also in Bologna I could attend language school. In order to meet other individuals, besides those I knew in Bologna, I had to travel by train to other cities such as Rome, Milan and Florence. This made Bologna a good place to live because almost all trains to all regions of Italy run through the city.

I knew some Italian before I left, but not enough to conduct fieldwork. Most Italians have little or no knowledge of English, so I chose to attend a language school in Bologna for seven weeks. Learning the language was important for gathering data and communicating with my informants. In order to be able to take part in conversations or observe groups of people to speak Italian was essential.

Bologna is an old medieval city in the northern part of Italy with about 500 000 inhabitants. It is called *la città rossa*, the red city, due to the red bricked houses and buildings in the city centre. Another reason for the nickname is that Bologna, and also the region, Emilia Romagna, where Bologna is located, has been communist and in opposition to the Christian Democrats longer than any other town or city in Italy. As a city with a history of opposition Bologna is an interesting site for fieldwork . Bologna is also known to be one of the few cities in Italy where homosexuals are accepted, which leads me to assume that it must also show greater acceptance and tolerance towards people of diverging opinions and life-styles. I experienced that the selection of available

books on new religions, New Age, occultism, magic, and Wicca was greater in Bologna than in other cities. The oldest university in Europe is situated in Bologna and has hosted many great thinkers, intellectuals, mathematicians, astrologers and alchemists. The university is still important and about 100 000 students attend the University of Bologna each year. Since there are many students the city is likely to be more open-minded than other cities in Italy.

Research

In recent years the body of research on paganism and Witchcraft by anthropologists, sociologists and historians has expanded, most of it conducted in the US and Britain. Tanya Luhrman studied the phenomenon of magic as it was practised in contemporary Great Britain. *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* was published in 1989 and represented the most informed and comprehensive academic work on Wiccan belief and practice up to that time (Hutton 1999). Other academics who have conducted research on Wicca and other forms of paganism are Susan Greenwood, who has also studied magicians in Great Britain, Sarah Pike (2000), Jone Salomonsen (2002), and Helen Berger (1999, 2003), who have all studied Witches and pagans in the USA. Among other scholars, both academic and pagans themselves, who have contributed to the body of research are Graham Harvey (1996), Ronald Hutton (1999), and Michael York (1995).

The most common method of studying Witches, pagans and magicians has been to become initiated into one or more covens; to participate at various rituals and meetings of one coven or more; and to attend different classes or courses, festivals, or other forms of gatherings.

In England and the USA, there are courses and classes one can join in order to learn about Wicca, magic and paganism. Jone Salomonsen studied Witches in the Reclaiming community of San Francisco in the USA over a period of ten years, on and off. She attended classes, participated in rituals and made friends in Reclaiming. After ten years she even got initiated. At the beginning of her fieldwork she was accepted into a

Reclaiming class because the teachers liked her project and her background from feminist theology. That was her entry ticket to the Reclaiming community. The participants of her class started a coven of which Salomonsen became a member. According to her, if she had not been accepted into that class and eventually into the coven, she would probably not have been able to participate in the religious practice from the inside. It also took her a long time to gain trust from the Reclaiming community in general, even though she was part of a coven (Salomonsen 2002). Sarah Pike (2001) gathered her data on magicians and neo-pagans in the USA through participation at festivals and neo-pagan gatherings over a time period of eight years. My own fieldwork had the time limit of six months, and as Salomonsen's experience shows, it takes a long time to gain the necessary trust.

Method

In order to locate practitioners of Wicca in Italy, I exchanged e-mails with the Pagan Federation in London, which has a network all over Europe. They were helpful and gave me the e-mail address of their contact in Italy, Pietro. Pietro practices paganism, but not Wicca. He gave me three e-mail addresses to three of his friends who all practice Wicca. Two of these were Simona and Maria. Maria became my friend and informant. Simona, on the other hand, was unfortunately absent most of the time during my stay.

I met Maria for the first time on a hot, sunny and humid day in July. I was walking through the streets looking up at the red brick buildings, which glowed with a warm reddish light. It was not far to the *piazza* where I was going to meet her by the statue of Neptune, a common meeting place where people also hang out in the evenings. I was excited and nervous at the same time. Would I recognise her? We had spoken on the phone the day before and agreed on what clothes to wear in order to recognise each other. I also realised how important she was for my fieldwork. She was currently my only contact and I hoped that she would like me, make room for me in her life, and help me meet others.

Then, after a short 20-minute walk I arrived at our meeting point. I could not see anyone that looked like a Witch or anyone looking as Maria had described herself. Then I saw a girl walking towards me, smiling at me. “That must be her”, I thought, “or maybe not, because she looks just like any other Italian girl around twenty”. But it was her. She looked like an ordinary Italian girl with long brown hair, a dark blue skirt and a pink t-shirt. The only visible sign of her practising Wicca was the pentacle, a five-pointed star within a circle, which she was wearing around her neck.

We spent the day walking around in the city centre. First she took me to all the bookstores in Bologna where she usually buys her books about Wicca and magic. One store, located in a small street about a ten minutes walk away, was closed for the vacation, but Maria promised to go back together with me another day. Then she took me to two other bookstores, both of which are chain stores with branches all over Italy. While walking, we talked about how she became Wiccan. I spoke in halting Italian and she replied slowly and clearly, helpfully using English words when I did not understand. We also talked about everyday things to try to get to know each other. I was asking many questions, desperately trying to get her to like me, trust me and want to meet me again.

On our way to one of the bookstores, we passed a store selling candles, stones, crystals, oils, and incense. We went inside and she tried to explain the use and meaning of different stones, of the different colours of the candles and of different scented oils.

Around the corner from this store is the largest bookstore in Bologna. It stocks a selection of books about New Age, Wicca, meditation, yoga, palm reading, mythologies, magic and other esoteric topics. After strolling around in the bookstore, we went to a bar to get something to drink and escape from the heat and to talk about Wicca, Maria’s studies and her family. My feet were swollen and my head was full of information. I was tired from trying to make as good an impression as possible and prove my genuine interest in Wicca and its practitioners. Afterwards, she had to leave to have dinner with her family. Before she left we agreed to meet again and she invited me to go with her to her friend Lisa’s house the following Saturday. Lisa is also practising Wicca. Lisa, Maria, Cinzia and Simona are all members of the same coven.

My first meeting went well, and full of optimism I looked forward to meeting other Witches. This turned out to be hard. The field is fragmented because there is no socially visible Wiccan community in Italy. I was not able to locate any coven other than Maria's, and even though we became friends, I was not initiated into her coven. There are, of course, many reasons for this, and one of them could be that I did not have enough time to establish the needed trust. There were neither classes nor courses to attend. As other studies of Witches and other pagans show, coincidences and time are important entry factors when studying people who consider themselves to be practising mystical religions.

Living with my informants was impossible because both Maria and Lisa lived with their parents. Many Italian Witches keep their religion and their identity as a Witch a secret from their families. This, of course, makes it difficult to live with any of them. I chose to rent a room in an apartment in the city centre; a short walk from Maria, Lisa, and the train station.

Meeting practitioners

Throughout the fieldwork it turned out to be very difficult to meet practitioners. Even though many of the people I met or was in contact with through phone or e-mail wanted to meet me, they were not able to do so due to their busy time schedules and other personal obstacles that hindered them from meeting me or inviting me home. They were all busy people with jobs and university studies, and were without a lot of extra time in which to meet me. Still, most of the interviews included in this study are conducted with people that I have met more than once. I wanted to establish trust between us in order for them to be willing to speak openly to me.

Another reason why it was difficult to meet Witches might have been because they keep their religion secret and therefore did not want to meet me. This could also be why it was difficult to be allowed to attend rituals. However, when they first decided to meet me, they spoke freely and told me many things. Often they dedicated a whole day,

afternoon or evening, and generously told me about themselves as persons and as Witches, content to have an interested listener that did not judge

My informants are mostly young girls in their early twenties. However, those I met and spoke with vary in age from 16 to 50, and are both men and women, although a majority are women. Most of them have either been through higher education or are attending university. All of them grew up in Catholic families and thus have a Catholic religious background.

A short introduction to my main informants; Maria, Lisa, Cinzia and Simona are members of the same coven and are all in their early twenties. All of them have practised Wicca for 5-6 years. They live in Bologna with their parents. Maria and Lisa are those of my informants with whom I spent most time. Cinzia and Simona I met only two or three times. Clara lives in Florence; she is 27 years old and has practised Wicca for about ten years. She lives alone and is practising together with Francesca who also lives in Florence. Francesca is 21 years old and has practised for four years. Marco and Paula both live in Rome and are two of the organisers of Pagan Pride Day. Marco is a man in his mid-forties and Paula is a woman in her early thirties. They claim to have practised Witchcraft for as long as they can remember, but have known that it is called Wicca for only about 10-12 years. Simone is a man in his early thirties, living in Milan. He has been practising Wicca since he was eleven or twelve. Rosalinda, Sara, and Teresa are three other Witches that I met a few times. Rosalinda and Teresa have been practising for 5-7 years and Sara has been practising for three. Both Rosalinda and Teresa live in Florence and Sara lives in a city near Bologna.

In addition to these main informants I met 42 Witches at a workshop, 13 at one meeting I attended, and 10 pagans at another meeting. 32 individuals answered a questionnaire I distributed via Internet. I also met two other individuals; one young man in Florence who was 23 years old and one girl living in a town near Bologna, 17 years old, both of whom had practised Wicca for about a year. At the Pagan Pride Day I spoke to three teenagers practising Wicca and two days after the Pagan Pride I met them again to conduct an interview.

According to Susan Greenwood “Magic and the study of witchcraft is a classic anthropological concern; but research in a complex society – in a non-classical field – brings specific problems” (Greenwood 2000:11). The problems I experienced were meeting and finding Witches due to their busy time-schedules. My potential informants lived in different cities all over Italy, many of them keep their religion secret, and Wicca is not yet a socially visible community in Italy.

Wicca in Italy exists as networks and not yet as groups or organisations with places to meet. Groups form and dissolve easily, and this made it difficult for me to conduct traditional anthropological fieldwork, which would have involved being with a group or being initiated into a coven. As an example of this difficult and fragmented field, I will mention one incident. Pietro also gave me the e-mail address to a third woman, Monica, who lives in the Northeast of Italy. She practices Wicca and was part of a coven. I contacted her and we agreed to meet when I first arrived in Italy. However, she fell ill before I arrived and her group dissolved during that summer. The story about Monica indicates how incidental and fragile this kind of fieldwork can be. Even though she could not meet me, Monica answered questions by e-mail during the autumn, when she recovered. Another girl that I considered to be a good informant developed personal problems during the first three months of my fieldwork and was not able to meet me as much as she and I wanted. When the field is fragmented like this people practice alone. They do not gather in special localities where I could find them and spend time hanging around. I had to actively seek out practitioners, and, relying on the snowball method, hope to be introduced to others.

Due to the character of my field I had to find methodological solutions, such as questionnaires, interviews, reading books, and participating by way of the Internet, in addition to spending as much time as possible on every opportunity. On two occasions I attended meetings and arrangements that I was invited to, and I participated on events such as Pagan Pride Day and a weekend-workshop.

Events are an important scenario for gathering information (Falk-Moore 1994). Two occasions of participating and observing events occurred during my fieldwork. The

Pagan Pride Day was one of these events. It is an international day for pagans to meet. The event originated in the USA and is now arranged in many European countries in addition to the USA and Canada⁹. Pagan Pride Day in Italy was arranged in a park in Rome for the first time in 2001, and since then every year. On Pagan Pride Day I participated in the organised commune ritual where everyone present could join. A marriage, or handfasting as pagans call it, was conducted in the park and different seminars were arranged.

I was invited to two different meetings by different groups of people. One of the meetings was with a pagan group. They were about ten individuals, both men and women. The youngest woman was in her mid-twenties and the oldest man was 70, the average age was 35. The meeting was arranged in order to discuss how to organise a group or establish an organisation for pagans. At the other meeting thirteen Witches were present; eleven women and two men. They were meeting in order to see if they could form a coven together¹⁰.

Interviews

Making an appointment for an interview was often the easiest way to meet people after the initial contact. I used a tape recorder for most of the interviews and transcribed them later. If it was not possible to record, I wrote down both interviews and conversations in as much detail as possible, in their own words as far as I could remember and as soon as possible, often on the train back home. If there was something I was not sure of, something I forgot or wanted to know more in detail, I could always ask the next time we met or by e-mail.

During the six months of fieldwork I managed to interview nine Witches, three men and the six women. There were four other Witches I tried to meet but again, but they did not manage to find the time to meet me. The interviews were conducted both at cafés and in private; either in their homes or at my place. Often they asked whether I would

⁹ See also chapter eight for further information.

¹⁰ Both of these meetings is further discussed in chapter six and eight

tape the interview or take notes, cautious about me remembering the details and acquiring the correct information. Most of the interviews were conducted in Italian, but two were conducted in English. One time was at the beginning of my fieldwork because the Witch I was interviewing spoke better English than I spoke Italian. On the other occasion we spoke English because one of the individuals present, the husband of one of the two individuals I was interviewing, did not speak Italian. On those two occasions when the interview was conducted in English the interviewees demonstrated a good knowledge of the English language and had no trouble expressing themselves.

The interviews were of an informal character and took the form of conversations rather than structured interview. In order to discover what my informants considered important topics I chose to ask few questions and to rather let them speak. Hence, the interviews took the form of a conversation with few, and only open-ended, questions. I often started asking how and why they joined Wicca. On being asked that question their answer often included their life story and philosophical preoccupations.

Participation

I spent time with Maria and Lisa, and when opportunities to attend gatherings arose I also attended these, and was thus able to observe social relations. I often went to Maria's place to eat or to watch films such as "the Craft", "Blair Witch Project", and "Practical Magic", which is a series of films about witches and magic that she used to teach me about Wicca. She pointed out what she considered to be Wiccan and what she considered to be commercialised goods. She also read Tarot-cards for me. Since Maria still lives at home I met her parents and her two sisters. Sometimes we also spent time with some of her Wiccan friends and sometimes with some of her other friends.

Every Tuesday evening at a bar in Bologna they played music from the 1980s. Both Maria and Lisa find music, clothes and hairstyles from the 80's very exciting and we went to this bar together several times during my fieldwork.

Galina Lindquist argues that instead of 'participant observation' it should be called 'experiencing participation' (1995: 5). "This involves socialization in their systems of meanings and participation in the dynamic process of the construction of these meanings in which they are engaged" (1995: 5). Considering this, participating in a ritual would be important to me, in order to participate in all the arenas where meanings are constructed. It was not enough to take part in their daily life and conduct interviews.

Jone Salomonsen (2002) argues that it is not possible to observe Witches' rituals, covens or classes from the outside. One has to participate. In order to understand the object of study and in particular the study of magical rituals "[...] engagement is important to understand, distance is important to observe, remember and record details" (Salomonsen 2002: 18).

Because there are no sacred texts in Wicca to be analysed, Wendy Griffin argues that participation therefore becomes even more important, especially when it comes to the rituals and the physical, subjective aspect. She points out that the Goddess spirituality, which includes Wicca, "[...] is radically embodied; to totally ignore experiential knowledge would dramatically and unnecessarily limit our understanding of the phenomenon" (Griffin 2000:16). An alternative way of learning about this spirituality is to learn what the practitioners learn and what one believes one is capable of experiencing (Griffin 2000).

Access to rituals in order to get first hand experience was difficult to gain. Firstly, it was difficult to attain enough trust to be accepted into rituals and secondly, it was difficult to locate groups performing rituals. Participating in someone's solitary ritual was of course impossible. At the end of my fieldwork I had yet not participated in any private ritual. I asked Maria and Lisa on two sabbats (Halloween and Yule) if I could attend their ritual, but they told me that it was not possible. On one occasion, at Halloween, they explained that it was impossible because they were going to celebrate this ritual together with people I had never met before. The ritual would be of a very personal character, and it would be difficult if I was present. However, I was welcome to join them when it would only be them, and no strangers. At the Yule-ritual they considered me not ready

for a ritual for which they would need a lot of energy for their magical work, and for which I was, according to them, neither ready nor prepared.

Due to this, after my first period of fieldwork a dimension in my material was missing. I had not seen the religious practise other than the reading of Tarot-cards, runes, the public commune ritual on Pagan Pride and the handfasting ceremony.

However, in March I was invited to a weekend workshop of magic mainly for Witches¹¹. 42 people attended this workshop; five men and 37 women. Although it was organised by Italian Witches the woman in charge of the religious practice was an American, Phyllis Currot. She has been practicing Wicca for many years and is an initiated high-priestess in a coven in the USA called the Temple of Ara. She practises within the shamanistic tradition of Wicca and is influenced by Egyptian mythology. She is also the author of a book, *Book of Shadows*¹², which is popular among Wiccans in Italy. For many it is also an introduction to Wicca. The book is about how she started on her magical path, personal experiences, different techniques, rituals, and spells used for living healthy, in harmony, and in happiness. The title of the book, “Book of shadows”, refers to a form of diary that Witches write. In this diary they write down spells, feelings, rituals and other issues concerning their religious practice.

About one third of the participants had never participated at a similar workshop or performed rituals together with others. The purpose of this workshop was to learn and to practice the performance of rituals and magic. During the weekend different ritual techniques were practiced in small groups of 7-8 individuals. Also, greater rituals and shamanistic practices where everybody participated together, including a shamanistic drum circle carried out in order to find our guiding animal spirit, were practiced. That weekend was, in addition to being able to participate on the inside, a social gathering where I got the chance to socialise with Witches and observe them in the context of other Wiccans. For me, this workshop was a turning point in understanding the religion and its

¹¹ For more information on this workshop see chapter eight.

¹² The hardback version of this book is called *Il sentiero della dea* (The feeling of the goddess) and the paperback is called *Una strega a New York*, (A witch in New York).

practitioners, changing my understanding of what it is to be a Witch, how they perceive themselves, and how they interact with each other. This experience proved that Griffin, Lindquist, and Salomonsen are correct in emphasising the importance of ritual participation. It provided me with a different angle and other contexts from those I could obtain during my first stay in Bologna and it added the missing dimension from my first six months of fieldwork. I think the time gap of three months between my fieldwork and the opportunity to return to the field may also have been fortunate; both because I was showing my informants that my interest in them was genuine and because of the time I had had to reflect on my material.

Alternative sources of information

Since various factors made it difficult for me to meet Witches face to face on a regular basis, the Internet became an important tool and a valuable source of information. Some of the Witches answered questions via e-mail. The answers were, of course, limited through the use of e-mail, but, on the other hand, before answering, they had the chance to think and reflect on my questions. However, by using e-mail I missed the social context.

The Internet also became valuable as a place to locate potential contacts due to the lack of places to meet, such as clubs, organisations, gatherings, and other places where people with similar interests gather. It also proved valuable in order to keep in touch with already established contacts who lived far away or were unavailable for other reasons. Because there were no covens I could be initiated into or classes or courses I could attend, the Internet, with its possibilities for communication with different individuals in order to get different views and experiences, was invaluable. On the Internet there are many websites with forums for questions or discussions that I examined. I subscribed to two mailing lists where the members can post questions or have discussions that I could follow.

Maria and Lisa have friends who own a Wiccan website, and in order to get an image of the practitioners in Italy I posted a questionnaire on their Internet site in August 2002, at the beginning of my fieldwork. Maria and Lisa helped me, both to formulate the questions in Italian so that I was confident I was asking what I intended to ask, and also by allowing me to test the questions on them. I received 32 answers from people between 12 and 36 years old, of whom 26 were women and 6 were men. Five of these were 12 –14 years old, eleven were 15-19 years, seven of them were 20-24 years, six were 25-30 years and there were three who were over 30. All of them, except for three, agreed to answer further questions by e-mail. I followed up the questionnaire with general questions, and a second time with some more specific personal questions¹³. Fourteen of these correspondents answered the common questions, but only four answered the individual questions. Two people agreed to meet me for a personal interview; however, I met only one of them because the other was not able to find the time.

Written material also became an important source of information. Eduardo Archetti emphasises that written sources of data are important because through them one can indirectly understand the identity of the people one is studying (Archetti 1994). Wiccans read about magic, antique religions and mythology, and books about Wicca written by practitioners. Books about magic, and the books of Phyllis Currot (*Book of shadows*) and Scott Cunningham (*Wicca, A guide for the Solitaire Practitioner*), are books many of my informants read. Many of those I met told me that Currot's book was important to them as an introduction to Wicca. They said that they feel or have felt the same way as the author and are familiar with the feelings and events described in the book. Written material such as introductory books and other books written by Wiccans, novels, and other books my informants considered important consequently became important for me to read in order to understand how they create and understand their

¹³ See appendix 1 and 2 for the questionnaire and the follow-up questions.

identity. Therefore I will refer to textbooks written by practitioners as empirical data in addition to my own empirical data gathered from interviews and observations.

My position /Ethics

I am not a practitioner of Wicca or any other religious tradition. According to Sharp (1997), when studying a religion there are both negative and positive aspects regarding whether or not the researcher is him/herself a believer. It can be argued that the believer has a more intuitive and instinctive understanding of the religion of which he or she also is a committed practitioner. This commitment, however, can also hinder the believer from seeing the religion from any other perspective than its own and thus not be able to look at the phenomena from an academic perspective. The non-believer, on the other hand, has the advantage of being able to see the religion from the outside but has greater difficulties in grasping the relationship between the human and the divine that lies at the heart of the religion. Then there are also those who have previously been religiously committed. After leaving a religion they can be capable of seeing the religion both from the outside and be able to grasp the relation between humans and deities. However, having left a religion behind there are often antagonistic feelings. Furthermore,

“To enter into the discipline of religious studies is [...] to accept that faith for what it claims to be, namely a window on to an unseen world of the powers which control men’s destinies and a map of the seen and the unseen universe. Whether or not the map is an adequate one according to the student’s own inherited understanding is of no consequence; what is important is that the student should accept it as coherent and indeed inevitable, given the premises on which it is based” (Sharpe 1997:13).

Being non-religious myself may mean that I am not able to grasp the emotional meaning of the religion. However, my open-mindedness did bring me into a process of learning but not to begin on a personal spiritual quest. Being able to grasp the

relationships between the people and their deities has proved difficult, but listening to my informants' stories about their own experiences and taking part in religious practices whenever possible has helped me to understand the practice of this religion to a certain degree. One incident during the workshop made me aware of the importance of the divine. During one of the rituals the high-priestess "drew down" the goddess, meaning that she invoked the goddess so that the goddess, presumably, was 'present' inside her¹⁴. During the time the goddess was 'present' the atmosphere was tense and emotional. Many of the participants were crying silently, tears drying and running down their cheeks. This experience gave me a new and different understanding of their world and a wider basis for trying to understand it. However, my not being a practitioner may explain my difficulties entering rituals.

The ethics of conducting an anthropological study of people practising Wicca concerned me during my fieldwork. I always tried to present myself as a student of anthropology when I approached new people. In group gatherings I informed everybody I talked to and always the people in charge of my status, to make sure that as many people as possible knew the purpose of my participation. Most of my informants had heard about anthropology, and most of them had a rough idea of what it is.

Because many of the practitioners keep their religion secret I was very careful not to divulge who they were to outsiders. This sometimes made it difficult to tell non-Wiccans about my purpose. According to the ethical guidelines from the Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH)¹⁵, the researcher is obliged to respect human dignity, protect the persons involved in the research project and respect a person's decision whether or not to be a part of the project. In other words I was to gain informed consent. Most of the time there were no problems with this, but it was not always possible to achieve.

¹⁴ This is a ritual act called "Drawing down the moon"

¹⁵ <http://www.etikkom.no/Engelsk/NESH/Publications/NESHguide> 8.6.2004

Representation

All the real names of my informants have been altered and I have made them anonymous by altering their age or by being vague about their education or familial situation. Phyllis Currot is not an altered name, and I have not made her anonymous because she is an official Witch and not one of my informants.

When referring to deities as gods and goddesses I will use lower case and not capital letters. Even if all of my informants talk of one goddess and one god with different aspects, I choose to see them as different gods and goddesses. This is because my informants choose one goddess or god and then personalize them as their main deity. However, when I quote my informants or refer to a specific goddess or god I will use the upper case.

When referring to Wicca I will use capital letters because Wicca is a specific, pagan religion. Even if the practitioners do not have a dogma, they still belong to the same system of beliefs and identify themselves as belonging to the same spiritual community. The practitioners themselves separate between different traditions within paganism. Due to this I see paganism as an umbrella term that contains different traditions, such as Wicca, Druidism, Shamanism etc, and will therefore use a small p in paganism. Due to the use of capital W in Wicca, I also choose to capitalise Witch when referring to my informants or other practitioners of Wicca that use the label 'Witch'. When I use a lower case w in the word 'witch', I refer to other kinds of witches such as traditional or historical witches. I argue as Greenwood, that modern Witchcraft or Wicca is not the form of magic associated with peasants and rural knowledge. It is a form of magic that has developed from the magical tradition of the Renaissance (Greenwood 2000).

My fieldwork was conducted in Italy, a country in which the Catholic Church is a dominant religious force. Thus, when I refer to Christianity I mean Catholicism, as did my informants. When referring to the Church, I mean the Catholic Church.

5. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

“Human beings are driven not only to struggle to survive by making and remaking their material conditions of existence, but also to survive by making sense of the world and their place in it. This is a cultural production, as making sense of themselves as actors in their own cultural worlds. Cultural practices of meaning-making are intrinsically self-motivated as aspects of identity-making and self-construction: in making our cultural worlds we make our self”

(Paul Willis 2000: xiv)

Introduction

In this chapter I intend to outline the theoretical background for my thesis; modernity. Wicca is a new religion, and therefore I see it as created in late modernity. My informants live within the context of late modernity, in an urban, advanced industrial setting, and this is the framework in which each individual creates his or her identity.

Both Tanya Luhrman (1989) and Helen Berger (1999) have studied the rationality of modern magic. Its practitioners are often highly educated and have a good understanding of the scientific explanatory models of nature. However, they believe in magic and explain the world in terms of their magical worldview. Berger (1999) employed Giddens’ structuration theory in order to understand and explain why the practice of magic seems reasonable to modern educated Witches. I will also examine Wicca in the light of late modernity, but examine it in terms of the dialectic between individuality and community, and not in terms of its rationality.

Theorists of modernity emphasise different aspects of modernity. Bauman emphasises chaos and the change in the concept of community. Giddens emphasises insecurity and individuality.

According to Zygmunt Bauman (2001), a main feature of late modernity is the search for community. He argues, as I will depict below, that humans need to feel the

security of belonging to a community, and at the same time they need to have the opportunity to be an individual, to construct their own identity and to live their lives as they wish, without constraints from the community that provides their sense of belonging. This ambiguity will be my main concern in this thesis; how a community can provide both belonging and individual freedom in the era of late modernity.

The study of religion in the industrial and western world

According to Beckford, an American sociologist of religion, nineteenth-century sociologists found religion interesting and important for its presumed capacity to supply order and continuity in the then emerging industrial society. Theorists of the mid-twentieth century added to this the capacity of religions to supply meaning and identity for both individuals and groups when the basic orderliness of industrial society seemed to be unquestionable. More recently, social theorists have become aware of religions' capacity to challenge or threaten prevailing order and meaning in the unrest which is characteristic of advanced industrial societies (Beckford 1992).

James Beckford (2003) claims that it is difficult to define religion because one risks excluding practices that are seen by their practitioners as religious. However, religion is first and foremost a social phenomenon, related to the supernatural, super-empirical or noumenal realities. Regardless of this, religious beliefs and experiences will always be expressed by means of human ideas, symbols, feeling, practices and organisations. As the products of social interactions, structures and processes they influence social life and cultural meanings to varying degrees.

Beckford (1992, 2003) claims that the development of new religious and spiritual movements, such as New Age, challenges traditional definitions of religion. In the new religious movements individuals are seen as a part of nature, and individual growth is connected to cosmic changes. The individual is seen as attending to and helping these changes to manifest themselves. These new religious movements share a holistic worldview. Wicca and paganism are not mentioned specifically, but they obviously fit

into his model of new religions (Berger 1999). Because religion is a social construction, Beckford argues that the new religious movements are part of social change, just as changes to the self are viewed as part of the changes in the world. Therefore, according to Beckford, it is important to examine these religions in order to see changes in society in late modernity, not least since these religions developed in the modern period (Beckford 1992, 2003).

Knut Lundby claims that meaning and belonging are two themes that must be focused on in the study of religion in the western world. Both meaning and belonging express religiosity and cannot be separated. Only together can they give the whole picture of religiosity. Participation will bring about religious belonging, activate the religious content of the community, and renew each and every participant's religious meaning. It is religious belonging that bestows religious meaning, although it is possible that a particular religiosity is a reflection of a particular form of belonging (1987).

The empirical bases for Lundby's theories are American church environments where these religious practitioners who are members of a congregation gather on different occasions. However, he found the same pattern in his studies of Tøyen Church in Oslo, Norway. What I want to look at in my thesis is how the aspect of belonging is expressed when there are no congregations, and when the possibility of participating in religious activities in a community environment is not present.

Modernity

Ambivalence, according to Bauman (1991), is an important feature of modernity. Another characteristic of modernity is that it is an era of identity problems; an era when people have problems with finding themselves. Chaos rules, and the most outstanding aspect of modernity is the task of order, which is the most impossible of the tasks imposed by modernity. Order and chaos are modern twins and in modern times the quest for order is important (Bauman 1991).

“We can think of modernity as of a time when order – of the world, of the human habitat, of the human itself, and of the connection between all three – is reflected upon; a matter of thought, of concern, of a practice that is aware of itself, conscious of being a conscious practise and wary of the void it would leave were it to halt or merely relent” (Bauman 1991:5).

The only alternative to order is chaos; the uncertainty that is the source of all fears. The alternative to order is indefinability, incoherence, incongruity, incompatibility, illogicality, irrationality, ambiguity, confusion, undecidability, and ambivalence. It is the division between order and chaos that makes for the existence of the modern. Chaos is necessary for the modern, in order for the modern to go on and make order (Bauman 1991). “The existence is modern in as far as it is guided by the urge of designing what otherwise would not be there: designing of *itself*” (Bauman 1991:7).

According to Anthony Giddens modernity is “[...] models of social life or organisation which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards and which subsequently became more or less worldwide in their influence” (Giddens 1990:1).

It is a time characterised by changes in institutions, which again influenced the life of individuals, and hence the self. It is characterised by uncertainty and multiplicity of choices. It must be understood at an institutional level, and the transformation introduced by modern institutions intertwines with an individual life in a direct way, and therefore also with the self (Giddens 1991). According to Giddens, late modernity is a time that is apocalyptic due to problems that previous generations did not have to deal with, like atomic weaponry, international conflicts, ecological catastrophes etc.

We are now entering a new era because the consequences of modernity are becoming more radicalised and universal than before. But instead of calling it post-modernity Giddens chooses to call it late modernity since we are only about to enter the post-modern era.

One of the consequences of modernity is that we are disoriented because systematic knowledge about social organisation can not be obtained. This results in a

feeling of having “[...] been caught up in a universe of events we do not fully understand and which seems in large part outside of our control” (Giddens 1990: 2). People are disoriented and feel insecure.

All traditional types of social order have been swept away by the transformations involved in modernity, such as the most intimate and personal features of our day-to-day existence which have been altered. Even though there are continuities, the changes have occurred in such a dramatic and immense way, and at such a rapid rate over the last three or four centuries, that when we try to interpret the changes we only get limited assistance from what we know about prior periods of transition (Giddens 1990). From all these changes insecurity arises. Individual people are left to their own devices because the institutions that earlier tied people together are not as important as before. I suggest that Witchcraft creates new webs of meaning as a response to this. It brings about new lifestyles and a new politics of daily life.

Self-reflexivity is also one of the major characteristics of modernity, and identity becomes a self-reflexive process where a narrative of one's self is one of the means by which the self is reflexively understood (Giddens 1990). Giddens (1990, 1991) emphasises books and manuals, guides, and therapeutic works that contribute to this self-reflexivity. Seen in this light, new religions with a focus on self-development and self-reflexivity are thus a product of modernity.

Late modernity and self-identity

Personal meaninglessness and the feeling that life has nothing worthwhile to offer becomes a psychological problem in late modernity. Everyday questions about morality are restrictively denied answers and bring about existential isolation and personal meaninglessness. ‘Existential isolation’ is a separation from the moral resources necessary to live a full and satisfying life, and only to a lesser extent a separation of individuals from others. It is through the reflexive project of the self that strategies for actualisation and mastery will be developed (Giddens 1991). Therefore, community

alone is not enough. It should be a community that is experienced as expressing the ultimate moral resources and which removes the existential isolation.

Ontological security is “[a] sense of continuity and order in events, including those not directly within the perceptual environment of the individual”. All individuals try to establish ontological security of some sort. This security will be based on some routines of various forms. “People handle dangers, and the fears associated with them, in terms of the emotional and behavioural ‘formulae’ which have come to be a part of their everyday behaviour and thought” (Giddens 1991: 44).

Globalisation is one of the characteristics of modernity and it *disembeds social relations*. Giddens defines globalisation as “[...] intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring miles away and vice versa” (Giddens 1990: 64). So, in conditions of modernity, where the organising aspects of the day-to-day life are disembedding institutions, more and more people are linking local practises with globalised social relations (Giddens 1990). Modernity offers individuals an immense number of choices and at the same time offers little help in what choices to make. In the condition of late modernity, individuals are all in a sense forced to choose and follow lifestyles. Giddens defines lifestyle as “[...] a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfil utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity” (Giddens 1991:81). Lifestyle takes on a particular significance in modern times. Individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices due to the interplay between the local and the global, and daily life is reconstituted in terms of dialectic interplay between these.

According to Gordon Mathews (2000) the choices made are not truly free. People choose, in accordance with their class, gender, religious beliefs, ethnicity and citizenship, and all the exigencies of their own personal moulding, from a cultural supermarket that heavily advertises some choices and suppresses others. The choices made by individuals are not for themselves but as performance for and in negotiation with others. This global supermarket is available on the Internet, through television, films, books, magazines, etc.

Self-identity is formed on three different levels according to Mathews. Firstly, as members of a society where people live by certain rules, norms and values. General values may differ from one's own, but one must more or less conform. Secondly, the cultural supermarket where individuals can pick and choose the ideas they want to live by. Thirdly, identity consists of both a personal identity and a collective identity. Collective identity is the identity an individual senses they have in common with others. Individual identity is one's sense of who one uniquely is. People think they choose their religion freely, but identity is shaped on all three levels. One's choice of religion may lie at the core of who one senses oneself to be. These choices are freely made but with an eye to one's social world (Mathews 2000).

Modernity produces difference, exclusion and marginalisation. Because modern institutions hold out the possibility of emancipation, they create mechanisms of suppression instead of the actualisation of self (Giddens 1991). Wicca can be seen as a survival strategy or as a creative response to the challenges brought about by modernity. Wicca can be emancipating for several reasons: its proclaimed freedom of belief, that everyone can and should do what feels right for them, its anti-hierarchical ideology, that everyone is their own priest, and other elements antithetical to the church and the rest of society. Does it lead to actualisation of the self or suppression? Are people who practice Wicca being suppressed as they actualise themselves? The practice of Wicca can be ambiguous, because it can both be suppression and actualisation of self.

I have sketched an outline of the insecurity and other consequences brought about by modernity, such as individually and reflexively created identity. Self-reflexivity and individuality are distinctive aspects of late modernity; as is personal meaninglessness. Religion can be a way of creating both ontological security and personal meaning. However, as Lunby has pointed out, in the study of western religion one has to study both meaning and belonging, as two intertwined aspects of religion. I will now give an outline of Bauman's views on these matters. He states that even though individuality is a distinct aspect of late modernity humans also need a sense of belonging. Having given Giddens' understanding of existential belonging, as separation from moral resources, I will now

turn to Bauman and his perspective on the need for community and belonging as necessary for a satisfying life.

Community today and the search for security

According to Giddens, in modernity space has been separated from place. Place refers to a locale with physical settings for social activity. In the pre-modern period space and place coincided because social activities required presence in order for people to interact with each other. But modernity separates place and space because it encourages relations between absent others, which means that face-to-face interaction is not necessary in the creation and development of social relations. Hence, the “locality” of a meeting place is no longer necessarily tied to a physical place. Social connections are extended over space and time (Giddens 1990). The separation of space and place creates opportunities for the creation of a sense of belonging without face-to-face interaction on a regular basis. The search for community can therefore be fulfilled in many ways, such as networking.

Bauman (2001) disagrees with Giddens, and claims that:

“We miss community because we miss security, a quality crucial to happy life, but one which the world we inhabit is ever less able to offer and ever more reluctant to promise. But community remains stubbornly missing, eludes our grasp or keeps falling apart, because the way in which this world prompts us to go about fulfilling our dreams of a secure life does not bring us closer to their fulfilment; instead of being mitigated, our security grows as we go, and so we go on dreaming, trying, and failing”
(Bauman 2001:145).

According to Bauman (2001), in order to be satisfied we need to both belong somewhere and keep intact our individual freedom.

The world in which we live is a ruthless and insecure world; our society has become associated with risk and with changing social environments and a decline of community. This results in the disintegration of human bonds, and we search for ways to retie the bonds that have been torn apart. Community, which we connect with security

and as place for people to take care of each other, has become a paradise lost. A community is a place for shared understanding. It is dependent on similitude. Living a life in the absence of a close-knit community life will often feel dissatisfying and on occasions frightening. One of the problems with community, although it takes care of security, is that individual freedom will be restrained. Freedom and living in a community may cause conflicts, but the scarcity of one or another will result in an unsatisfactory life. Individuality is important, but still, the “[...] members of the global elite feel on occasion the need of belonging” (Bauman 2001:63).

As mentioned above, Giddens argues that what create personal meaninglessness is an individual’s separation from moral resources and not the separation of individuals from each other. According to Bauman, on the other hand, and as we just have seen, both the individual project and the sense of belonging are necessary for a satisfying and meaningful life.

The individuality that characterises modernity also characterises pagans. They are individualistic and do often practise alone. According to Amy Simes, the legitimacy of a group that never meet face-to face is not lessened by pagan standards. “Modern Pagans often belong to groups which never meet, and consider such membership as valid as belonging to groups which do occasionally meet” (Simes 1995: 169). Pagan groups, organisations and festivals do exist, although there are not many in Italy yet, and new groups and organisations are created and dissolved all the time. The making and dissolving of groups is a process that often happens at a rapid rate (Simes 1995)

Late-modernity is characterised by Giddens as a time of individuality. Individuals create their own identity through life-style choices that are made from a tremendous number of options because of globalisation. Bauman, however, claims that late-modernity is a time where chaos rules and that the quest of modern people is to make order. Although individuality dominates, people seek community because they need to belong. They need a community where individual freedom is not restrained and they can feel belonging.

I will examine the strategies employed by the Witches in order to create a community. What I intend to show is that the Witches create existential communities, which Giddens points out as important. They also create a community where practitioners can recognise each other and feel a sense of having something in common. In order to do this I will employ Catherine Bell's theory of ritualisation. What she emphasises in her theory is that when they participate in rituals people are socialised into a worldview, and common and shared symbols will be learned. The ritual will also in itself be a symbol of their community. Even though Witches do not always participate in rituals with other Witches, I propose that it is through performing rituals they will be socialised and create a sense of belonging. The use of symbols, being the Witches strategy, will make the community capable of providing both security and preserve individual freedom at the same time.

Summary

From one main perspective modernity is, according to Bauman, an era dominated by chaos, ambivalence, and uncertainty. Giddens claims that in modernity insecurity and individuality dominate. The need to choose life-styles from a multiplicity of choices is brought about by globalisation. Both Bauman and Giddens emphasise the need for control that arises in modernity. According to Bauman it is the quest of modernity to create order out of the chaos that prevails. Giddens argues that insecurity prevails and people feel that they have lost control. Wicca can be a strategy in trying to gain a feeling of control. In order to live a satisfying life, it is not only necessary to have one's freedom; one also needs a community. Bauman argues that what creates an unsatisfying life is separation from others, while Giddens claim that it is separation from moral resources. However, the community needs to be of another character than the traditional tight-knit community. Communities in modernity need to be loose-knit in order to create a sense of belonging and keep needed individual freedoms.

I suggest that this form of community can be created through the use of symbols. Therefore I will employ theories of ritualization. When a new worldview and new models of explanation are incorporated through rituals, the meaning of the world the Witches live in, and of one's own identity, will be created.

Part two

6. THE RITUAL LIFE

Introduction

In an introductory book for practitioners of Wicca, Vivian Crowley, who is a British Wiccan high-priestess, states that the rituals evolve as the practitioner's understanding of Wicca develops. The rituals are all built on the same core of information and this core of information is commonly understood among Wiccans. By keeping the shared core the basis of rituals it will preserve "the common thread that is recognisably Wicca" (Crowley 1996:6). An important aspect of rituals is thus being able to recognise what is and what is not Wiccan. I suggest that recognising the core of the rituals will lead to a sense of belonging. Since most practitioners of Wicca in Italy are solitary practitioners, socialization and learning has to take place in several arenas. The performance of rituals is an arena where socialization into the Wiccan worldview can take place.

Different anthropologists have proposed different definitions of what a ritual is. Bobby Alexander defines ritual in the following way:

"Ritual defined in the most general and basic terms is a performance, planned or improvised, that effects a transition from everyday life to an alternative context within which the everyday is transformed"

(Bobby Alexander 1997:139)

Alexander emphasises the performance aspect of ritual and that ritual transforms the everyday to another context. In rituals Witches invoke a goddess and a god and believe themselves to be in contact with divine powers. So, according to the definition by Alexander, what the Witches do in a ritual is to transform the everyday to a place where one can be in contact with the 'otherworld'. Susan Greenwood (2000) examined the

effect of rituals and claims that rituals are important in the creation of magical identities because it is through the rituals that magicians make contact with the ‘otherworld’.

According to her:

“Rituals form a theatrical space apart from the ordinary world, in which the body is seen to be the locus of the forces that are personalized as spirits or deities of the otherworld. For magicians, ritual is a space of resistance to the rationalism of the wider culture. Rituals are viewed as a space where margins gains contact with the otherworld, a special ‘place between the worlds’, where magical transformations are said to occur”

(Susan Greenwood 2000:2).

What I intend to look at in this chapter is how and why the rituals are performed. As suggested above, the rituals are a separation from the everyday. The question will then be how this transformation is executed. Before I explore this, I will describe one of the Witches’ rituals in which I participated; the sabbat called Equinox or Ostara, celebrated on the 21 of March. I will then present some theoretical perspectives and explore the ritual life of Wicca. What I propose is that Witches are socialised into the worldview of Wicca through performing rituals. Furthermore, I suggest that a sense of belonging is created due to a recognisable shared core of structures and symbols.

Equinox

It was Friday afternoon, and we arrived at the *agriculturismo* where the workshop was going to take place. The landscape of hills (*colline*) surrounded the *agriculturismo*. The sun was shining and there was a cold breeze blowing. The Witches arrived, either in small groups of three or four, or alone. The organisers of the workshop had arranged that those living in the same area could come together by car or by train, so that no one should have to arrive alone unless they wanted to.

We¹⁶ were 37 women from the age of 20 to 65 and 5 men between 25 and 40, including the people organising the workshop. The anticipation of being there was distinct. Some of the participants had already met the previous year at a similar workshop, but for the others it was the first time they were participating in a workshop and even the first time they would be conducting rituals together with other Witches.

A celebration of the sabbat called the Spring Equinox was taking place. In preparation for the ritual those who had arrived early prepared an altar. A table, which was used as the altar, was placed in the middle of where the circle, one of the basic structures of rituals, was to be formed. Objects symbolising the four elements were placed on the table in their correct corners; a stone represented the earth, a bowl of water represented water, a red candle represented fire, and incense representing the air. The quarters, north, east, west, and south, were also represented with different coloured candles. A statue symbolising the goddess was placed on the northern part of the altar and flowers were put down in order to decorate the altar and make it nice. Those who had brought personal objects put them on the altar in order to recharge the objects with energy that would be raised during the ritual. Objects on an altar are believed to absorb this energy. The different objects that people put down were stones, crystals, candles, tarot cards, small statues, small drumming instruments, incense and other objects that they either usually keep on their alters back home, employ in rituals or use in everyday life.

Spring Equinox is dedicated to fertility and therefore everyone had brought one small bag of seeds that they also placed on the altar. Seeds are a special part of this ritual, the Spring Equinox. Spring is the time of year when seeds are sown and they will grow with energy from the sun. During the ritual the seeds are believed to absorb energy from the goddess and nature, and thus increase their growing potential. They represent and symbolise the growing potential of spring and the potential of the participants to grow as persons and to cultivate the inner qualities that they want to develop or work on during

¹⁶ I will be using 'we' and 'us' in the ritual description because I participated at the workshop and in the rituals.

the year to come. Wine for libation¹⁷ was placed on the altar as were home-made pastries shaped as five-pointed stars made by one of the girls. The five-pointed stars we would all eat after the ritual.

When the altar was prepared the ritual could begin. The atmosphere was tense, people were ecstatic, and there was a lot of expectation in the air. We gathered and stood in a large circle. In order to make us mentally prepared for the ritual the high-priestess guided us through grounding, using visual meditation. Basically, to do this we had to breathe deeply and concentrate our minds on visualising roots coming out from our feet and going down into the earth. Furthermore, the roots were visualised as connecting to the centre of the earth, in order to draw energy throughout our visualised roots. By the time we felt filled with energy we withdrew the roots and opened our eyes.

The circle was cast by holding hands. We were still standing in the circle, and one by one we took the hand of the person next to us, looked into her or his eyes and said: *“mano a mano, formo questo cerchio”*, hand in hand I form this circle. When the circle was completed, four volunteers were asked to call the four quarters. While the volunteers, one at the time, called a quarter, we all faced the direction being called and raised our hands in the air in a v-shape in order to welcome the spirit. The volunteer asked the spirits of the quarter to join us in the ritual and be our guardians while drawing a pentacle in the air, starting at the corner of the star corresponding to that specific quarter.

Then the four volunteers walked in turn, one at the time, clockwise around the circle with the symbol for each element in his or her hands in order to consecrate the circle. The person in charge of air began walking from the eastern corner with lit incense and walked three times around the circle while asking the element to join us in the ritual, to bring to the gathering the attributes that are thought to be linked with air and to keep the ritual safe. The person in charge of fire walked around with a lit candle, repeating the sequence. The one holding water walked around the circle sprinkling water, and the fourth person holding earth sprinkled salt on the ground. Each of them asked their

¹⁷ The pouring out of wine or other liquid in honour of a god

respective element to be present in the ritual and guard us from negative energy and forces in order to make the ritual safe.

When the circle was cast, the high-priestess invoked the goddess, and one of the male participants invoked the god. This was done by wishing them both welcome and asking them to be with us in the ritual and to listen to us.

Then, hand in hand, we chanted and danced around the circle in order to raise the energy. When the energy was felt to reach a climax we all went into the centre of the circle, turning our palms towards the altar, and transferred the energy from our hands and bodies onto the seeds and the other objects. We again formed the circle and the seeds were put in a bowl. The high-priestess brought the seeds around the circle to all the participants. We each took a handful and said aloud personal qualities that we wanted to grow and cultivate during the year to come. The wishes varied from strength and spirituality to creativity and love. Most wishes were focused on personal and spiritual inner growth, but some were for peace on earth. After the weekend the seeds would be taken home and planted, to symbolise the growth of our aims and desires.

After the energy had been raised and the wishes uttered, we honoured the goddess. The high-priestess walked clockwise around the circle with the carafe of wine, stopped in front of each person and poured wine into each person's cup. When the cups were full, one by one we made a toast to the goddess and wished for something. Many of the people wanted the war in Iraq to end, and prayed for peace and love to emanate on Earth. We poured half of the wine onto the ground to honour the goddess or the god, and drank the rest. The high-priestess kissed us on the cheeks and said, "you are the goddess" to the women and "you are the god" to the men, before she moved on to the next person and repeated the sequence.

Before ending the ritual we had to close the circle. The quarters were thanked for being with us during the ritual and keeping us safe while we drew pentacles in the air in the opposite direction from before. We were again holding hands and when letting go each and every one said, one by one, "*mano a mano, chiuso questo c rchio*", hand in hand I close this circle. The circle was closed, the ritual was completed, one hour had

passed, the sun was ready to set and everyone became aware of the cold breeze of an evening in March. We ate the five-pointed star shaped pastries, gathered in small groups and talked about what we had experienced in the ritual.

The how, when and why of rituals

The depicted ritual was a sabbat celebration. There are other kinds of rituals which are celebrated in various ways. I intend to give an account of how rituals are celebrated, who celebrates rituals together, where they are celebrated, and why the Witches celebrate them. I will also look at some of the structures, elements, and some of the central symbols in the rituals.

There are two main types of ritual cycles, the sabbats and the esbats. In addition, Witches also celebrate personal rituals and rites of passage. Certain structures constitute the basic form in all Wiccan rituals. First, the circle is cast as a creation of sacred space and this is performed in various ways. Some groups draw the circle with a ritual knife called athame; other groups cast the circle by holding hands, such as in the ritual described above. After the circle is cast the spirits of the four directions and the four elements are called into the circle as protection for the ritual and its participants from powerful forces or energies. Then a god or a goddess, or both, are invoked. What words are used and which god or goddess is invoked depends upon the purpose of the ritual. Depending on the preferences of the person or the group performing the ritual, magical energy is raised through physical activities such as chanting or dancing or perhaps mentally induced through meditation. Magical work is performed when casting energy into the world in order to bring about a change for one or more individuals or for the community in general. Magic is meant to enact upon various subjects. It can be to heal someone sick, find a job for someone, find a lover, create rain, stop a war, or attend to other issues that the Witches are concerned with and wish to change (Berger 2003). All of this is in accordance with what I witnessed and was told by my informants.

In addition to magical work that may enact changes, Wiccans celebrate their relations with goddesses and gods and make contact with them in the rituals. According to Paula, one of my informants, “all the gods are one God and all the goddesses are one Goddess, and the God and the Goddess are two polar and complementary aspects of the Divine”. This makes Wicca both a polytheistic and monotheistic religion at the same time. The divine is immanent, in everything and everywhere. Because of this everything can be an image of the gods and goddesses. Paula explains that the divinities are portrayed as humans because it makes it easier to relate to them. Maria sees the gods and goddesses as a divine energy that possesses both masculine and feminine aspects and energies, which separately are called god and goddess. Other practitioners prefer to call all the aspects of the energy, such as death, fertility etc, with the names of divinities from different cultures and mythologies. The names vary and depend on the subject in question and what mythology each individual prefers. Maria celebrates only the feminine and masculine aspects which, according to her, possess all the other aspects.

The rituals can be celebrated alone, in covens, or in small or big groups consisting of two or more people. The tendency in Italy is that there are a lot of solitary practitioners and small covens consisting of three or four people. According to my informants these small groups are closed and exclusive. The number of members in them varies according to how many other Witches they know or how many have the opportunity to participate due to restrictions of time and distance. The covens are also dependent on the fact that the members feel comfortable in each other's company. Some of my informants said that they prefer to practice alone; others practice alone because they have not yet found anyone with whom they feel comfortable practising; still others don't know other Witches in their vicinity or they don't know any other Witches at all. This I will explore further in chapter 8.

Those practising alone or in small covens participate sometimes in larger rituals together with other Wiccans and pagans on sabbats. Maria, Lisa and the two other girls have formed a small coven together and usually meet, both for esbats and sabbats, to celebrate together. On one occasion the four of them celebrated a sabbat, Belthane, on the

21st of May, together with approximately 30 other pagans and Wiccans. This ritual was organised in a private garden, and they had never met most of the other participants before. Simona told me that they had all been nervous, and especially Maria found it intimidating because of all the strangers that were there. Maria told me later that she prefers to celebrate sabbats just with the other girls in the coven and not with a lot of strangers.

In Wiccan rituals, when performed as a group, the participants carry out different tasks. The leader of the ritual is called a high-priest or a high-priestess, either one of them or both will lead the ritual. The optimal scenario is when both lead the rituals because the high-priest symbolises the god and the high-priestess symbolises the goddess. Since both the goddess and the god are represented in the ritual the optimal balance is achieved, because both the feminine and masculine aspects are present. In groups that normally practise together this task rotates. In ad-hoc groups it will often be the most experienced person who is the ritual leader. In some traditions of Wicca, but not in all, being a high-priest or high-priestess demands an initiation. Because a lot of my informants do rituals alone or perform in small groups, the formal initiation to be a high-priestess can be difficult to attain.

Marco was the high-priest in the communal ritual at the Pagan Pride Day and is not formally initiated as a high-priest. The woman, who was the high-priestess opposite him in the same ritual, was not formally initiated either. Both claimed that initiation as a high-priestess or high-priest is not necessary. "When you practise alone you are your own high-priest or high-priestess. The high-priestess or priest is the one leading the ritual. Normally, the most experienced person will act as the high-priestess or high-priest, but it is also a task that circulates," Marco told me. When Maria and her coven friends perform rituals, the different tasks to be done in a ritual circulate, as does the task of being high-priestess. She told me that the high-priestess or the high-priest is not more important than the others; it is just that she or he is the leader of that particular ritual. Because every practitioner is their own high-priestess or high-priest, they all are in direct contact with the divinity. During rituals and in the Wiccan worldview, everybody is of equal status.

Rituals are mostly celebrated where the practitioners have the opportunity to be left alone without disturbances. They are not dependent on a church or a temple in order to celebrate rituals. A ritual can be celebrated anywhere. One of the important aspects of Wicca is to be close to nature, and many practitioners try to celebrate outdoors if possible. However, the chances of being disturbed are bigger outdoors than indoors. Both Clara and Maria expressed how much they appreciate perform rituals outdoors in nature. Clara once went to an old place in the mountains and woods sacred to Diana, together with a group of eight other Witches¹⁸. The owner of the land was friendly to pagans and they got permission to camp and hold rituals on his land. They walked for a while before they put up their tents. One of the great things about this trip, according to Clara, was that they were close to nature. They used the river running through the land as a fridge; “nature’s own fridge” she said. Another thing she enjoyed was the opportunity to perform rituals spontaneously in nature. “We could do rituals spontaneously when we wanted to, and we didn’t have to plan them. I also felt closer to the Goddess when I was able to do rituals in this beautiful nature. It was so nice and I wish I could do it again sometime” she said. Maria’s coven always tries to perform rituals outside whenever it is possible, especially on esbats and sabbats. In March it was getting warmer and they celebrated the esbat outdoors. Even if the days were getting warmer, the nights were still cold so they made a bonfire to keep warm. The fire also induced a special atmosphere, according to Maria. They celebrate on Lisa’s parents’ land whenever they have the opportunity. When it is too cold they gather to celebrate indoors in a place where they won’t be disturbed. If none of them are alone at home they either wait a few days or they celebrate the ritual separately.

In rituals, the Witches contact the goddess or the god, magic is performed and they seek to enact changes upon individuals or the greater community. According to Clara, on sabbats it is common to ask the goddess for help in one personal issue and one regarding the greater community. If all Wiccans all over the world ask for the same thing at the same time, the power they create through magic will be more forceful and thereby

¹⁸ The Roman Goddess Diana – the Goddess of hunt.

make the chance for success bigger. One week before Samhain, one of the sabbats, the Witches are supposed to look back at the previous year and reconsider the wishes or promises they made to themselves and the goddess at the previous Samhain. According to Clara and Paula, this week should be used for isolation and reflection. Wiccans are supposed to turn introvert and centre on themselves, evaluate the previous year, and make new wishes and goals for the year to come. In some Wicca traditions, according to Paula, they turn the pentacle, a five-pointed star within a circle, upside down the week before Samhain¹⁹. This signifies that they are concentrated and focused on themselves.

Maria and Lisa also use the sabbats to ask the goddess for help or support, and to work on their personality and different personal aspects. In the rituals they ask the goddess for help in developing themselves as persons, and to develop their control over their own lives.

The effect of ritual

Right after the ritual many of the participants said that they got physical reactions such as thirst and hunger. Clara claims that she always has to eat something after having performed a ritual. Another of the women participating in the Equinox ritual stated that she always got very thirsty. They all claimed that they felt extremely exhausted after a ritual because it demanded considerable energy. In addition they stated that they felt stronger as persons, had acquired a more positive attitude towards life in general and a better basis for handling their problems of everyday life. I propose that this is because they experienced a sense of belonging and of not being alone. In the rituals they have contacted the divine and the energies of nature. Therefore, the induced sense of belonging is not only a sense of belonging to other people, but is also part of something greater. Jone Salomonsen comes to the same conclusion in her book, *Enchanted Feminism* (2002). After the rituals the Witches claim to feel more energetic, renewed, and

¹⁹ This is common in the Gardenian tradition.

strengthened, and they also feel that their social problems are easier to deal with and confront (Salomonsen 2002).

In order for the participants to keep in touch after the workshop, a mailing list was established. A few months after the workshop one of the participants wrote an e-mail claiming that only a few weeks after the workshop she had felt strong enough to face her everyday problems. But shortly after, she started to feel disillusioned as if all of her strength was gone. She wrote: "Soon after the workshop I thought I could fly, but things changed quickly. No serenity, not any single certainty, just a feeling of total emptiness." She felt as most of the positive feelings she experienced earlier was gone. Others expressed similar statements. So, it might be that the energetic feeling and the sense of feeling stronger that the Witches experience shortly after the rituals does not last for long. I will also propose that this emptiness she claimed to feel is a result of the fact that she had been together with people she felt she had something in common with. After the workshop she was again alone with all her thoughts and experiences. This, I suggest, led to the feeling of emptiness, which in turn confirms the importance of the sense of belonging to something or somewhere, in which one can identify him/herself. It also indicates that the Witches seek strength and control in the rituals. They experience a feeling of being in control of their life, of being closer to the divine and also, as I will argue, they feel coherence with others. In the above mentioned example, I suggested that the correspondent felt empty because she felt alone. However, I will suggest that the rituals can be experienced as strengthening, also when they are performed alone and that participating together with others is not a necessity, although it reinforces the positive feelings.

To explore this in greater detail I will employ the theories of Van Gennep, Turner, Geertz and Bell. In Van Gennep's theory of rites of passage, rituals consist of three phases; the phase of separation, the liminal phase and the phase of reintegration. In addition to rites of passage, these phases are also traced and seen in other rituals (van Gennep 1960). The theory of rites of passage is developed on rituals that mark transitions in human lives: death, marriage, the transition from adolescence to adult etc. The first

phase is when the initiate is separated from society and becomes liminal. In the liminal phase the initiates are taught norms and values that are valid for the new roles they are about to enter. In the third phase they are reintegrated into society as new persons. They are marked and changed as persons.

Turner (1991) emphasises the second phase, the liminal phase. He claims that in this phase one of the distinct aspects is the anti-structure that comes into being. What characterises the rites of passage is the passage from structure to anti-structure and the transition back to structure. The anti-structure, which characterizes the liminal phase, is what leads to *communitas*; a feeling of belonging and comradeship. *Communitas* arises between those who are in the liminal phase together, because they have something in common: They are separated from the greater society and hence feel a special bond of belonging.

As van Gennep pointed out, the three phases are recognised also in other rituals and therefore I propose that in Wiccan rituals all those who participate can be seen as liminoid. This is because they are separated from the rest of society due to their contact with the otherworld. Thus, anti-structure and ritual bonding develop during rituals. Turner's concept of *communitas* will be useful in order to explain the sense of belonging that occurs between practitioners that practice together. Both because rituals are manifestations of their belief and also because it can be seen as a sphere where only Witches and pagans participate.

Geertz emphasises other aspects of rituals. In his interpretation of religion, ritual plays the important role of making the worldview seem real. The worldview is the cognitive, existential aspect of a given culture. "The worldview is their picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society" (Geertz 1973:127). The ethos, which represents the worldview, is "the moral (and aesthetic) aspects of a given culture, the evaluative elements" (Geertz 1973: 126). "A people's ethos is [...] the underlying attitude toward themselves and their world that life reflects" (1973:127). One of the ways rituals can make the worldview seem real is by resisting historical change. The way people live, and the way in which their society is organised,

changes considerably over time, while ritual action tends to be highly conservative (Geertz 1973).

The structures of the rituals in Wicca and paganism are believed by my informants to be constructed in the same way as the original pagan rituals in ancient times were supposed to be. Some people claim that the rituals are a continuation from pagan times and also from the witches of the Middle Ages. Information about how rituals may have been performed in pre-Christian times is available from various literary sources.

For Marco it is important to reconstruct the rituals as they were performed in ancient pagan times, not only to reconstruct the structures but also the meaning of the ritual; its original purpose. Here he is in alignment with the British Wiccan high-priestess Vivianne Crowley, who states that in the rituals it is “[...] through the enactment of ancient myths which express eternal truths about human beings and the universe we inhabit” (Crowley 1996: 41). According to Geertz (1973), this is an effort to make a worldview seem real since the Witches are trying to reconstruct the historical ritual and keep the ritual the way it presumably was performed earlier, and thereby resist historical change. Marco claimed that even if the meaning embedded in the purpose has changed, it is important for him to keep the purpose in mind. Fertility may, for instance, not be the same kind of fertility as it was 2000 years ago, when fertility meant the fertility of the land, an agricultural fertility. For contemporary Witches, living in an urban setting, the agricultural aspect will no longer be of much importance, but other aspects of fertility will be the focus of the fertility rite. Wicca is believed to be an old religion by some and a new religion by others, but they try to reconstruct historical rituals and thereby make “an eternal” worldview seem real. They strive to be closer to nature and to live more in contact with it, because we are all part of the same energy. This can be observed expressed in the rituals but also in different aspects of everyday life. For instance, when they call the elements, looking for signs in nature, trying to feel the closeness and the energy from nature, and when they use stones, minerals and herbs for healing, their

striving is clear. Also, in everyday life and not only in rituals they try to get closer to nature and live more in contact with it.

The sacred symbols of the ritual induce moods and motivations in men and women, and they formulate the general conceptions of existence. These two aspects will meet in the ritual and they will reinforce each other (Geertz 1973:112-113). “A motivation is a persisting chronic inclination to perform certain sorts of acts and experience certain sorts of feeling in certain sorts of situations” (Geertz 1973:96). The moods that are induced by sacred symbols are feelings. The symbols used in rituals induce moods and motivations in the participants. The motivations last for a longer period of time while the moods occur more or less spontaneously. I propose that the feeling of strength that many Witches feel after participating in rituals is one of the motivations. The most important difference between them is that motivations are made meaningful in reference to the ends they are supposed to produce and the moods are made meaningful with reference to the conditions they are supposed to come from (Geertz 1973).

“In a ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic form, turn out to be the same world, producing thus that idiosyncratic transformation in one’s sense of reality” (Geertz 1973:112). While Alexander argues that reality is transformed, Geertz is explaining how. He argues that the transformation appears through the use of sacred symbols and through the moods and motivations that they induce.

According to Bell (1992), actions become ritual through ritualization. Ritualization is “the way in which certain social actions strategically distinguish themselves in relation to other actions” (1992: 74), and its aim is to socialise individuals into ritualized bodies with incorporated knowledge of certain schemes. Culturally specific strategies are employed to make the distinction between profane and sacred, in order to separate actions from each other as ritual actions and non-ritual actions. These distinctions must then be ascribed to realities that are thought to transcend the powers of humans. In a ritualized environment, through ritualization, the opposition between sacred

and profane are incorporated into the ritualized body. These schemes will be internalised and used in a wider social context. The ritualized body has a sense of ritual and the schemes become internalised as non-conscious knowledge. Internalisation is not a conscious action although the strategic action of ritualization is socialization and this socialization ends in the ritualized body. The ultimate purpose of ritualization is, according to Bell, socialization (Bell 1992).

I argue that when Witches participate in rituals, they are socialised into the Wiccan worldview. The moods and motivations are induced by symbols that set the action apart from other actions, and hence they create a ritualized environment where incorporation of schemes can take place. The structures employed in all rituals induce these moods and atmosphere. I propose that they induce a contrast between the mundane life and the sacred life. The generated moods and motivation are feelings of being closer to the divine, being a part of something, being in control of one's life and living one's identity as a Witch. When inducing the moods and motivations, individuals participating in the ritual will be prepared mentally and energetically. Hence the environment is ritualised and the participants can be transformed to ritualized bodies that can be socialised into the Wiccan worldview. Through ritualized actions certain cultural schemes are incorporated. Therefore, the worldview that is expressed in the ritual will be incorporated in the participants.

Elements of ritual

The structures of the rituals are, as already mentioned formalised and standardised. Rituals are described in books and on the Internet, and the information is easily accessible for practitioners. Rituals can be employed as described in the written manuals, or the Witches can use sequences of it, adding their own personal aspects in order to make the ritual their own. They can also invent a ritual and adjust it to their own needs and purposes. However, there are always some elements that will be the same; such as the pentacle or pentagram, the altar, and the circle. These symbols are always present in

Wiccan rituals, thus making it easily recognisable for practitioners, they contribute to communitas, and they induce a sense of belonging.

The pentacle



The pentacle is a pentagram, a five-pointed star within a circle, and is a symbol used in rituals. It is also one of the symbols that Witches and other pagans often wear around their necks, keep on the wall or the altar, and also use in other settings. According to Paula, four of the points of the pentagram refer to each of the four elements; earth, fire, water, and air. The fifth point, the one pointing upwards, symbolises the goddess.

According to Jone Salomonsen, the pentagram was used in occult ceremonial magic rituals in order to protect the participants against evil spirits. Witches do not believe in evil spirits, but they continue to use the pentagram in rituals. It symbolises human beings and their mystical dependency upon circles within circles (Salomonsen 2002).

The altar

The altar is a central object of a ritual. Usually symbols for each of the elements, the four directions, and the goddess are displayed. The symbols for each of the elements are placed at the cardinal points they are connected with and the symbol of the goddess is placed in the north. Witches often have permanent altars in their homes. Clara had three different altars and Maria had one. On these altars they often place a statue or other objects that the practitioner believes symbolise the goddess. In addition, symbols for all the elements are commonly present on their personal altars. Maria had on her altar a feather to represent air, a small bowl of salt to represent earth, a small bowl of water for water and a candle for fire.

Kept on the altars of Maria and Clara are objects symbolising the same as the objects on the altar prepared in the ritual already described. I suggest that the altar is one of the symbols that induce moods. A permanent altar also induces motivation because it is always present and it makes it easy to contact the divine. Due to the presence of the symbols of the four elements, the quarters and the goddess, the altar is a symbol of part of the worldview that everything is connected. The preparation of the altar, as carried out in the described Equinox ritual, can be seen as an action that set the ritual apart from other actions and hence makes it a ritualized environment. The action in itself induces a mood and sets the atmosphere, which will be the effect both when celebrating alone and together with others.

The circle

The circle can be seen as the temple where the Wiccans perform their rituals. It is a symbol for sacred space and in rituals it is the equivalent of a temple where celebrations take place. “The circle contains and represents the whole. [...] It is the place where physical, social and spatial boundaries are redrawn. The circle represents the wholeness of the human, the natural and the divine” (Greenwood 2000:85). The circle is not a physical thing, it is made physical, but it is psychological. It can be prepared anywhere, does not have to be continuous, and is remade from ritual to ritual. The circle is not dependent on a permanent place. Therefore it is not necessary for the Witches to have a congregation or a church in order to perform rituals or religious acts. Another factor that makes a church or congregation not required is that the rituals can be performed in solitude.

According to Marco, “the circle and the symbols that are used in rituals are just objects that prepare you psychologically and mentally for the ritual. They are not a necessity. You can also imagine the symbols and the circle in your own mind”.

Simone claims to have been practising Wicca for 20 years. According to him, to open and close the circle is important and essential as part of the ritual, because the ritual

has a certain form that it is necessary to carry out. Everyone has to do the special beginning and end to the ritual, but in the middle it is up to the practitioner to decide what is to be done. The circle is part of this special beginning and end, as well as being there for protection, which is why it is important.

What I suggest is that the circle makes a significant distinction between the sacred and the profane both because it marks the beginning and the end of the ritual and because the circle is seen as a sacred place. By marking the difference between sacred and profane, the circle also initiates a ritualized environment, which is necessary for socialization to occur. It prepares the practitioner psychologically and mentally, and it helps them focus on the ritual and the magical work to be done. In the ritual the practitioners are in contact with divine forces and energies. They are in contact with the ‘otherworld’. In the phase of anti-structure the relations are egalitarian, unstructured and undifferentiated social relations. Hence, the ritual can be seen to be characterised by anti-structure, and the participants are set apart from the rest of the society, as in Victor Turner’s (1991) definition of liminality and *communitas*. *Communitas* can therefore be developed in the rituals. Also, being in contact with the ‘otherworld’ reinforces a feeling of being a part of something greater, the universe.

The symbols I have now depicted are some of the common symbols and structures of a Wiccan ritual. The content of the ritual can be changed, but the symbols representing the elements, the goddess, and the circle are always present. When I came back from Pagan Pride in Rome, Maria was very curious about how it was and what we did. She wanted to accompany me to Rome, but was not able to because it was too expensive and she did not have any excuse to give her parents. I told her about the ritual, which was very simple and contained all the basic structures in order for everyone to be able to participate. However, I explained that a circle was formed, quarters and elements were called, the goddess and the god were invoked, energy were raised and magic performed, and the high-priestess and the high-priest recited some words. At the end of the ritual the high-priestess and the high-priest handed out biscuits and home-made *grappa* (liquor) for libation. Her response to this was: “That is basically how we do it too.

But we also do our things and the prayers are more personal”. The rituals are made personal by using words that they feel give meaning when invoking the deities, calling the elements, raising the energy in their specific way, and asking for help in personal matters. The deities invoked are based on the practitioner’s personal preferences and the purpose of the ritual. Maria recognised the ritual because she performs it the same way and adds personal elements. This supports the notion of the embedding of certain schemes of knowledge, which are further developed through rituals.

Since the rituals are structured around the same basic form and using the same basic symbols and structures, practitioners will be taught the Wiccan worldview through rituals even if they practice alone. Both from what Maria said, and due to the opportunities for Witches and pagans to participate in the same ritual without knowing each other or having any knowledge of each other from previous encounters, we can see that the rituals are recognised. As I have mentioned before, I see these basic forms, the structures and symbols, as what sets the action apart from other actions in order to make a ritualized environment and make socialization possible. Another aspect of this is that by employing similar structures as others, practitioners perform a ritual that they know others also perform and therefore they can see themselves as being part of something greater. They also see themselves as part of something greater because the ritual initiates contact with the ‘otherworld’. Those involved are set apart from society in general because they recognise symbols that outsiders not socialised into the worldview of Wicca will not be able to do. In the sense of Turner’s concept of *communitas* this distinction from the greater community will be more distinct in the rituals and it might induce a feeling of comradeship between the participants despite not being physically close.

Other rituals

In addition to the sabbats and the esbats Witches perform personal rituals and rites of passage. When they want to talk to or pray to the goddesses or gods they perform small rituals. These rituals are often simpler than the sabbats and esbats. The practitioner may,

for example, light a candle and incense, and talk to the goddess or the god and ask her or him for help and guidance. Marco is a man in his forties and he has practised Wicca since he was a teenager. Although he has been practicing Wicca for many years, he did not know that his practice had a name until ten years ago. Usually he performs a small ritual every evening before he goes to bed, which he describes as an evening prayer. Organising the circle and the altar takes too much time, so on these occasions he just imagines the circle, lights a candle and some incense and then he prays to the goddess. Again, the same structures as in the previous ritual are present. These are symbols that induce moods and motivations and thereby transform the everyday into another context, as defined by Alexander. Even though Marco does not prepare the circle or the altar, he imagines the structures. He mentally sets the action apart from other actions and transforms the everyday into another context. Therefore it is possible to only imagine the objects, which supports the notion of how the symbols induce moods and motivations. However, the same structures are present when Witches perform a ritual, whether physically, emotionally, or mentally.

Witches also perform rites of passage. The rites of passage can be marriages (handfasting, as pagans call it), celebration of a girl's first menstruation, initiation into a coven, initiation as a Witch, celebrations when a child is born etc. The only rite of passage in Italy that I witnessed, and heard about, was the handfasting performed at Pagan Pride. Most of my informants had initiated themselves as Witches and due to the lack of communities other forms of initiation can be difficult to perform. This I will explore in more detail in chapter 8.

Performing rituals - success and failures

In the rituals and when doing magic, the Witches believe they are working with powerful energies and forces. When they first start practising Wicca and performing rituals they use formulas written in the introductory books, because they are afraid of doing or saying something wrong. At the workshop, while performing rituals, those who had practised

Wicca for many years did not use books, but improvised and recited what felt natural to them. The less experienced practitioners, when calling the elements or invoking the divine, used invocations written in the books.

Before rituals the practitioners take a moment to clear their minds of everyday problems and to focus on the ritual. Exercises like meditation are therefore important. Paula told me that she has a couple of young girls for whom she is a spiritual guide. One of the first things the girls must exercise is visual meditation. According to Paula, it is important to be able to meditate in order to keep one's concentration and focus. If one is not ready to do magic, it can have terrible consequences as will be shown below. Another reason for why one should wait to do magic until one is ready, is the possibility of destroying the practitioner's motivation and beliefs if the magic should not work. Due to the powerful forces in action during a ritual focus and concentration is important and quite necessary.

It is believed that if a ritual is done in the wrong way there will be consequences for the practitioner, because it is believed that in rituals one works with powerful forces. The consequences are various, for example certain things in your life may go wrong or you may experience misfortune for a period. If the Witch is not experienced enough or able to deal with the forces in a capable manner, it can go terribly wrong.

Alberta's experience is a good example of what can happen if something goes wrong during a ritual. It is also an example of the belief that one is working with the presence of powerful energies in a ritual. She is a woman in her late forties and she claims that she has been a Witch all her life, although she found the label "Wicca" only a couple of years ago. She lives in a big old house in a small city in the northern part of Italy. For a living she works in an office and in addition she reads tarot cards and she is an astrologer. One day she carried out a ritual in her home to try and make a fire-spirit, that was in her house, leave her alone. While she was performing the ritual her mother came home and called to her, and this made her lose her concentration. Her sweater caught fire and she got severely burned. Because the red colour symbolises the element of fire and it was from the red candle that her sweater caught fire, her explanation was

that the spirit became angry when she asked him to leave. When she lost her concentration the spirit saw its opportunity and punished her by setting her on fire; not because the spirit is evil, only because it is powerful. She told this story to the high-priestess at the workshop, who consequently worried about Alberta. She wanted to make sure that Alberta knew and did fully understand that working with these kinds of spirits or energies is dangerous and not to be done alone unless you are highly experienced and trained. Because the spirit in question was a powerful spirit she should not try to make it leave but instead try to become friends with it. The result would then have been that the spirit would have left her alone.

What is magic?

Magic is said to be able to move energy consciously and intentionally. It is a central part of the practice and of rituals. In rituals, it is said that the “work of magic” is completed.

Scott Cunningham states that magic is neither something supernatural nor for changing nature according to your will, but it is something natural: “[i]t is harmonious movements of energies to create needed change” (2003: 6). According to Greenwood, “magicians’ identities are formed from their relationship with the otherworld, and part of the practice of magic as a spiritual path requires learning how to channel the forces of the cosmos” (Greenwood 2000:2). Magic is moving energies, forces of the cosmos worked on and channelled, in order to induce change.

According to Salomonsen (2002), in order to do magic during a ritual, Witches raise a cone of energy, and this can be done in various ways. It can be done mentally, or by dancing, chanting, and drumming. At the workshop we were divided into small groups and each of the groups had to do the basic structures of the ritual at least twice in order for everybody to practise as many parts or tasks of the ritual as possible. The tasks to be practised were calling the different elements, the quarters; invoking the god and the goddess; and leading the ritual. All the different groups raised energy in different ways. The group I participated in raised energy by chanting and dancing in circle while holding

hands. We chanted “*Aqua, fuoco, aria, terre, aqua, fuoco, aria, terra, ritorno, ritorno, ritorno, ritorno*”, water, fire, air, earth, return, return, return, return. We repeated it many times while dancing in a circle until we felt the energy to reach a climax. Another group were drumming and chanting “Ohm, ohm, ohm....” The purpose of raising energy is to channel it into needed or wanted change and to ask the goddess for help in something needed or desired.

During the commune ritual at Pagan Pride Day, we raised the energy mentally. Before the ritual we all got a sheet of paper with a description of the ritual including how to mentally visualise the raising of energy. At the end of the description it was written: “*E sappiate che avete appena creato della magia*”, and know now that you have just created magic.

Magic can also be seen as a way of praying. The ritual participants ask the invoked goddess or the god for help to accomplish or achieve something, ask for help to make an important decision, be stronger in an expected or ongoing situation, find inspiration, find love, find work, loose weight, be a better person, and do other things from assisting inner growth to addressing world problems. The work of magic is to manipulate energy, and the goddess, the god, and the four elements of nature are asked to help in this manipulation. In the next chapter I will examine magic as a means of self-therapy.

According to Salomonsen’s informants, there are two types of magic; path-magic and spell-magic. It is believed that path-magic is to submit to the divine, and the desired outcome is not expressed in specific terms. Spell-magic is to cast a spell asking the goddess for something specific. In path-magic one can also cast a spell, not asking for something specific, but for whatever the goddess sends forth (Salomonsen 2002).

Clara claimed that the way magic should be done is path-magic. If you, for instance, perform magic to gain the interest of a particular boy it can prevent you from meeting the person who is meant for you. She did spell-magic to achieve a boy’s attention one time and ended up with a broken heart. The boy she did magic to get was wrong for her. Sometimes she does spell-magic to get a parking space and other similar

practical things even if she knows that this kind of magic will get back at her three times. This “punishment” is a common warning and it is supposed to hinder Witches from applying their powers and magic work on innocent individuals, or to achieve something that is not rightfully theirs. Hence, the Witches do believe that they have powers to control their environment with spells and magic. However, the use of these powers should not be performed on innocent people and the immoral or wrong use of magical powers will be punished. The ethics are both passive and liberalistic; you can do what you want as long as you hurt nobody else.

Once, Clara was looking for a job, and she did path-magic in order to find one; any job, not one specific. After a week or so she went to a Witch-camp where she got acquainted with a woman. They talked about work and Clara told this woman that she was looking for work as a translator from German to Italian. After a month the woman called Clara and offered her a job as a translator at the publishing company where she worked. Clara considered meeting this woman as a result of her magical work done before the camp. The goddess helped Clara to meet this woman. Clara creates meaning when explaining the job-offer this way. Performing magic is made meaningful and it gives a feeling of being in control. When doing magic, it is believed that one can influence one’s own life.

Summary

In Wiccan rituals, both meaning and belonging are created and manifested. Alexander (1997) defined ritual as something that effects a transition from everyday life to an alternative context. Certain structures, such as opening and closing the circle in order to create a sacred space, effect a transition from everyday life to a space where Witches can contact the divine and be in contact with the ‘otherworld’. What the Witches seek in rituals is to feel close to the divine and to nature. When feeling close to the divine they claim to feel energetic and strengthened. These feelings are what create meaning in the ritual. I have argued that these feelings are motivations induced by the symbols.

As I have shown, symbols used in the rituals are all symbols that can set apart the action from the everyday because they separate the sacred and the profane. Victor Turner (1991) states that in the liminal phase *communitas* and comradeship will occur among participants. The distinction made by the symbols and structures also separates the participants from society in general. Therefore I argue that the feeling of *communitas* also occurs in Wiccan rituals.

Using the work of Catherine Bell (1992) I have argued that the sacred space created by symbols induces moods that set the action apart from other actions. Thus a ritualised environment is created that allows for socialisation into the Wiccan worldview. The basic structures, the circle, the altar, the pentacle, the calling of the four elements and the quarters, are the same in all Wiccan rituals, whether physically present or mentally constructed. However, the structures are present in one way or another. This makes Wiccan rituals recognisable for all practitioners and, as I have argued, makes belonging possible even if Witches practice alone. Because the rituals are built on the same core structures, all participants will recognise the ritual as Wiccan. Therefore the ritualized effect of socialization also occurs when the rituals are performed alone, at least to some degree of recognition. Because they all take part in something larger than just their own ritual, they may feel as though they belong to something greater. This way the ritualized body gives the strength to live in the modern world.

7. ME AND WITCHCRAFT

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how, and why, my informants became Witches, and how they perceive themselves as Witches. In order to examine this more closely I intend to tell different stories of how they found Wicca, why they chose this path and what they see as important aspects of their religion.

According to Anthony Giddens, identity is the way the self conceives of itself and labels itself. This sense of the self is conditioned by ongoing interactions with others (Giddens 1991). Identity is thus relational and is created in relation to significant others, individuals or groups that are chosen to be a frame of reference and identification. How do they express their identity and what is implied? Why do they see themselves as Witches? Most of my informants have been Catholics or they come from a Catholic family. They choose Wicca instead of atheism or other religious alternatives. Why? How did they discover this new religion? I intend to show that being or becoming a Witch is a process that takes time. It is a process where one becomes a Witch through interaction with other Witches and is an inner process where one develops one's religious identity. As part of this process Witches develop and evolve as persons and acquire new perspectives on the world in which they live. It is an inner personal growth as well as a creation of a new identity.

The narratives of the self, according to Giddens, are "[...] the story or stories by means of which self-identity is reflexively understood, both by the individual concerned and by others" (1991: 243). By applying Giddens' concept of narratives of the self to how Witches express their identity, we can achieve an understanding of the way they conceive and label themselves.

In the following I intend to show that the stories Witches tell themselves about themselves are of different kinds, but that they are still similar. The stories that are told

express the important aspects emphasized when identifying with other Wiccans. I intend to show that they narrate themselves into a group or community.

Becoming a Witch

There are different paths to how people come to join Wicca. From many of the stories of how individual people have joined Wicca it seems that very few say that they have actually chosen to become a Witch. One means of entry is that the Witch believes she or he has always been practising Wicca and only recognises the name coincidentally. Others search for something to believe in and stumble across Wicca. Another common way is that a film, an Internet site, a book, or a friend awakens their interest in paganism, magic, and Wicca. According to Helen Berger (2003) many neo-pagans and Witches declare that they feel they are “returning home” when they first learn about the religion. However, they don’t wake up one morning a believer or decide that they are now Wiccan. It is a process where they study and read books about Wicca, magic and mythology. This is evident in many of the answers to my questionnaires. All those who stated that they had been practising Wicca for less than a year stated that they study Wicca, but do not perform rituals on esbats and sabbats, divination techniques, healing, astrology etc. Some of these also stated that they do not label themselves a Witch because they have just started to learn about the religion. This indicates that being a Witch is a process and it takes time before one is ready to call oneself a Witch. Self-therapy is one process of being Wiccan: One constantly tries to change oneself, works on one’s inner qualities, learns more about Wicca and becomes more confident in the different techniques to be mastered. They change into what they consider to be a better person through the work of magic. What they want to change into is a person who is in harmony with oneself and with nature, and a person who is tolerant and in harmony with other people. These characteristics are generally accepted to be the characteristics of a Witch.

According to my informants, they could not become better persons while Catholics, because they felt there was no room for individuality and personal spirituality.

This indicates that the Catholic Church in Italy is not seen as modern enough. It is not adjusted to individuality and individual freedom, which is important in modernity. They also perceive the Church to be intolerant and out of balance with nature and non-Catholics. The Church is, according to my informants, intolerant, restrictive and narrow-minded. This, they say, is because women cannot become priests, homosexuals are not welcome in the Catholic Church, and the Church claims its ideology and belief system to be the only true one.

The way many of my informants have discovered Wicca, decided to learn more about it and now identify themselves as Witches can be depicted through the stories of Maria, Lisa and Clara. These three stories are different in terms of how they discovered Wicca, but they are typical of all the narratives I was told. Maria and Lisa are good friends, and both practice Wicca. They have been practising for about six years. Even though they are friends they both discovered Wicca independently of each other. In the beginning they practised in solitary before they discovered that their friend practiced Wicca too. Now they practice together. Clara and Lisa believe that they have always been Witches, where as Maria made a decision to study and become a Witch. I will present the stories of these three, and give accounts of other ways of becoming a Witch in order to see if I can find a pattern in the way they choose to become Witches, how they understand themselves, and the way they tell their stories.

Lisa

Lisa and I are sitting in my kitchen talking about her life as a Wiccan. We met three months before this interview. We had seen two films together and we had talked about Wicca before, but never just the two of us alone. We made coffee while Lisa told me about herself, her family, and her religious life and thoughts. We also talked about everyday joys and sorrows. Lisa is 23 years old, studies natural science at the University, and has just moved from her family's house to her grandmother's in order to be closer to the university.

When I asked her how she discovered Wicca she said “I have never discovered Wicca, it is something I have always done”. When she says she has always been doing Wicca, she means that she has always been religious and always felt attracted to the different aspects of Wicca such as magic and the feeling of being close to nature. Lisa told me that when she was a child she was a devoted Catholic, prayed everyday and went to mass every Sunday. Her father is also a devoted Catholic, as is her grandmother. She joined the scouts, which is based on Catholicism, when she was ten years old and felt that she did not fit in because prayer and the other religious activities did not accommodate her needs any longer. “I felt that something was wrong. I went to the meetings and prayed and did all those other things, but I felt that this was not the right thing for me” she said. Being a scout includes a lot of activities in nature, such as hiking and camping in the forest and mountains. In nature she found a world that she felt was hers.

She stayed in the Church until she was 15 years old and thought that she could find ways to adjust to the Church and still be able to fulfil her religious beliefs and needs. However, she felt that the Catholic mentality was too closed and too narrow-minded, which made it impossible for her to continue to identify herself with the Church. She felt that as a Christian she conducted rituals and performed other religious activities without knowing the meaning behind the activity. She did not know why she had to perform that specific activity and nobody asked questions to find out. She thinks that in the Church today no one really knows or cares about these meaning and no questions are asked. She said “The words: ‘Thank you Lord’, did not mean anything to me. Why did I have to thank him and for what? I felt a need to identify with something and if I can’t identify with anything I would say that nothing exists”.

When she discovered that women cannot become Catholic priests in the Church, it did not make any sense to her. “When it occurred to me that women have no place in the Church I felt sad. It is because of a woman that Christianity has a prophet. She gave birth to God’s son.” She started to ask questions about the Catholic practices and beliefs and wanted to understand why. When she was 16 years old she had, according to herself, a mystical crisis. This led her to search for something else to identify with. She found

Catholicism to be missing spirituality. She needed answers and room for developing her own spirituality. In addition to these thoughts about the Church she had been interested and fascinated by magic, esoteric literature, and spirituality since childhood

One day Lisa went to a bookstore in order to buy runes, which are used in a divination technique. They are Nordic runes drawn on small pieces of plastic, wood or stone. Each of the runes has a different significance. The divination can be done in different ways, and one of these is to put all the small pieces in one bag and take one out without looking. The sign is interpreted and that is the divination.

However, when she was looking for runes she discovered a book in the window: *Book of shadows* by Phyllis Currot. She had to buy it, because she felt as if the book was “calling to her”. The book is written as a novel, based on Currot’s own story of how she found Wicca and her experiences. Lisa said, “In the book I found philosophy, beliefs, and experiences I could identify with”.

Lisa no longer identifies with Catholicism, even though she practised it as a child. Catholicism could not fulfil her spiritual needs even though she still felt religious. She discovered Wicca by reading about it in the book, and hence chose to follow that spiritual path, because she felt she could identify with this new religion. She needed something with which she could identify in order to create meaning.

Bauman (2001) argues that modern people need a community to which it is not only important to belong, but also in which individual freedom is not restrained. In Lisa’s story it is evident that she felt her individual freedom threatened. She was not able to find a way to satisfy her individual spiritual needs as long as she stayed in the Church. She left that community in order to be able to find an arena in which she could fulfil her needs. Another possible reason could be that she broke with her community when she became aware of the meaning of individuality and freedom at the age of 16.

Maria’s story is in many ways similar to Lisa’s, but also different. Lisa claimed to have always been a Witch, whereas Maria, as I will show, chose to start practicing Wicca.

Maria

Maria is 23, the same age as Lisa. She studies social science at the university, and lives with her parents and her two sisters. Maria has, like Lisa, always been religious. How did she discover Wicca, and why was she searching for something in the first place?

I have always been a Catholic and I have always been religious. When I was 15 I started questioning the Church and its power. Why do the priests have so much power to decide what is wrong and what is right? Why do you have to ask God for forgiveness when you do not feel you have done anything wrong? Why can women not become priests? Why do I need a third person in order to communicate with God? I asked myself all these questions and started to search for something else. I have always been religious and therefore it did not feel right to become an atheist. One day I read a book “The mist of Avalon”²⁰. It triggered my interest in paganism and I started to search for more information. Then Lisa told me about “The book of shadows” (“Il sentiro della dea”), I read it and I liked it very much. I then started to read more books about magic, paganism and other books about Wicca. That’s how I got interested in Wicca and magic. Since then, Lisa and I have been practicing and learning about Wicca and we have a coven together with two other girls. Wicca is an alternative to Catholicism and it is a religion where you can talk directly to the goddess and where women can also be priestesses. There are both gods and goddesses in Wicca, but I prefer the Goddess since I am a woman.

Both Lisa and Maria discovered Wicca by reading books, but it seems that Lisa emphasizes that she has always been Wiccan without knowing its proper name. Lisa felt that the book was “calling to her” and she identified with parts of what was written in the book.

Maria’s entry into the religion was initiated by *The mist of Avalon*, but she did not express any thoughts that she has always been a Witch; and she claims that anyone can learn to be a Witch.

²⁰ *The mist of Avalon*, written by Maria Zimmer Bradley, is about King Arthur and his kingdom in the times when Christianity and paganism lived side by side. King Arthur’s mother and her sisters are witches and his aunt is a high-priestess that serves the Goddess. This aunt brings Arthur’s sister to Avalon where all the servants of the goddess live and she is brought up to be a high-priestess. At the end of the book King Arthur dies and England is Christianised, while paganism and the worship of the Goddess seemingly disappeared.

Dissatisfaction with the Church made the girls search for something else other than Catholicism. This reason is stated by many of my informants. Both Lisa and Maria felt religious, but the Catholic Church could not satisfy their religious needs. Also, according to academic scholars, individuals that join Wicca express dissatisfaction with what they experience as patriarchal religions, such as Christianity and Judaism (Salomonsen 2002, Pike 2001).

In these two stories we can also trace an aspect of feminism. Maria prefers the goddess, and both girls are critical of the Church because women cannot enter the priesthood. Lisa claims that feminism is important to her, and I suggest that turning away from the Church, and joining Wicca instead, is an expression of her feminist attitude. It is important for her to be religious, but it is also important for her to be able to practice her religion under the same conditions as others and to not be left out of certain aspects of the practice because of her sex. It can be seen as a way to emphasize the feminine and to be proud of being a woman.

Clara

Another typical story of discovering Wicca is Clara's story. She is 27 and has been practising Wicca for more than ten years. She maintains that she has always been interested in magic. Her mother awakened her interest in magic by giving her a stock of Tarot cards at the age of nine. Ever since, she has read many books on magic; as many as she could find in Italy. At that time, in the 1980's and the early 1990s, there were no books about Wicca in Italy and therefore she did not know about it. When she was 15 she went on a school trip to London, and in a bookstore she found many books about Wicca. When she looked at them she thought "This is me, I have finally found a name for what I believe in and for who I am".

Clara's story is representative of many stories I heard about how Italians start practising Wicca. Often they have searched for a long time reading books about different religions but have not found one that feels right. Then they stumble across a book or a

site about Wicca on the Internet, and feel that they finally have found something they feel is right for them and that they “have come home”.

Another group of practitioners is those who have been practising Wicca for many years without having a name for it. When the moon is full they perform rituals; light incense to honour nature, the goddesses and the gods; and read various mythologies and books about magic. When they stumble across a book about Wicca or a web-site, they find a name for what they have always believed. Take this quote from one of the questionnaires; “I have always felt it inside me and I found a name for it while surfing on the Internet” (questionnaire no 3)²¹. Others find out when talking to people about what they believe in and how they practice, and are then told that what they practise is called Wicca.

TV series, such as “Buffy, the vampire slayer” and “Charmed”, and movies like “The Craft” and “Practical magic”, are films and series that draw on knowledge about ‘modern’ witchcraft, and these begin an interest in many young people, mostly teenagers. When watching these series and films they start to search for more information about magic and witchcraft and end up with information on Wicca. Others find a web-site or a book about Wicca, such as *The mist of Avalon* and *Book of shadows*, by coincidence, and their interest is initiated that way. As questionnaire number 30 states, “For about a year ago while surfing on the Internet I arrived at a Wiccan site, and I started to look for information. After having reflected on it for some months I started to practice (Wicca)”.

Margot Adler, a Gardenian high-priestess, journalist and author of *Drawing Down the moon* (1986), a book about paganism in the USA, has recorded similar stories of entry into the religion, as have scholars who have studied pagans and Witches (see for example Berger 1999). Practitioners of Wicca and paganism often use the phrase “I’ve come home”, “I always knew I had a religion, I just never knew it had a name” (Adler 1986). The same phrases were common among my informants and on the questionnaire, such as “I did not discover it, I have always been. It is a thing that was born in me when I was little. Honestly, I feel more Wiccan than Catholic” (questionnaire no 10, girl 22 years).

²¹ The answers to the questionnaire are translated from Italian to English

To most people it is important to be able to identify their religion and have a name for what they believe in. When finding a name for their religious practice they also discover that they are not alone. This, from my questionnaire, is typical; “I saw it (Wicca) many times by chance, but it was when I read a book by Gardner I understood that I had found my path and that I was not alone seeing things as I did. When I discovered that someone else saw things the same way as I do, it all started to make sense” (questionnaire no. 30).

Telling similar stories creates a sense of having something in common. The Wiccans’ narratives are similar, and are therefore a way to construct their new identity. The narratives can be used in order to place oneself narratively into a social context and a community. Through the narratives they display how they understand themselves and hence others can interpret who they believe themselves to be. They reflect upon who they are by telling their narratives and putting these narratives into context. Many of them believe that they have always been a Witch. This is also, I will argue, an expression of belonging. It strengthens the sense of belonging and the identification with a group or a community.

Learning to be a Witch

Wicca is a practice that must be learned. A large number of books are available in English, and some of them are translated into Italian. The rituals can be learned through reading as can some of the other practices such as Tarot, astrology, runes etc. In Italy most of my informants have learned the practices via books, and one of my informants claimed that Italian practitioners of Wicca should be called ‘book Witches’ because of this. Various workshops are arranged, and some of my informants have even learned Wiccan practice abroad. One of my informants was member of a coven in France, another discovered and learned Wicca in the Netherlands, and two of my informants have picked it up in Great Britain. However, the majority have learned it from books.

Besides the rituals described in the previous chapter, Witches read a lot about the philosophy of Wicca and magic, and do different activities such as practice and learn about herbal medicine. They also perform rituals and do exercises such as meditation and various divination arts such as tarot, pendulum, runes and astrology. Two of my informants have also just started to learn the practice of Reiki, a Japanese healing tradition. Practice and study are important according to all my informants, but what one chooses to do is optional. Tarot cards and runes as divination techniques are frequently learned by many of my informants.

Some start practising with a friend and others prefer to practise alone in the beginning until they feel ready to perform rituals with others. The beginners often study a lot of books about Wicca, herbs, oils, stones and crystals, and mythology. They often read articles or books together and discuss parts of them or teach each other things and exchange experiences. On internet sites there are forums for discussion and questions where one can ask for advice on certain issues or discuss topics that are of interest. On mailing lists, different kinds of research on, for instance, special oils or herbs or other subjects of interest, are posted in order for the other members of the mailing list to read.

Learning Wicca can be seen as both an inner and an external path. The inner path refers to the development of self-knowledge and inner growth, while the outer path can be characterised as “how to” knowledge, gained from reading books.

What is being a Witch?

What is the essence of being a Witch and what aspects of Wicca are important to the practitioners? Maria, Lisa and Clara said that they could no longer identify with the Church. They discovered Wicca and found that they could identify with this new religion. Why do they identify with Wicca?

Being close to and in harmony with nature, the surroundings and one's self are important values in Wicca. When I asked practitioners what the meaning of ‘witch’ is to

them the most common answers I got were that a Witch is a wise person, man or woman, who lives in harmony with nature, with other people and themselves. A Witch apprehends and appreciates nature, and she or he learns how to read the signs offered by nature. A Witch works with the powers of nature, the elements and energy through magic. A Witch is a person that lives in accordance with the principle of growth in nature and is in contact with the divine, the god and the goddess.

Wicca, as I will show, is a way to gain control over one's life and to try to create order, as exemplified by the following quotation: "To me, Wicca is a way to live, a way to be and a way to see things. Wicca is the most beautiful thing that has happened to me in a while. Wicca gives you courage, gives you strength and it gives you a new personal character. You get a deeper knowledge of this world, which is getting more and more destroyed. Everything is dissolving but Wicca gives you the strength to go on, believing in your self and the earth that we walk. It gives you the possibility to know nature, stay in contact with it and listen to it. Wicca is life to me" (questionnaire no. 14).

The respondent in the quotation above is a 25 year old girl that has been practising Wicca for about five years, and her words are the words of many. Her words reveal the core values of what many Witches see as the important aspect of Wicca; being close to and in harmony with nature, the divine (the goddesses and the gods) and with one self. Thus they creating wholeness and aliveness, and, feeling as part of a bigger whole, they create meaning and a feeling of being alive.

Giddens (1990, 1991) and Bauman (1991) state that late modernity or post-modernity is characterised by the ambiguity between chaos and order. People are disoriented and feel that they seemingly have no control. According to Bauman (1991), the main goal of modernity is to make order in the chaos. In the quotation above, the respondent states that Wicca gives them the strength to go on in a world that is being destroyed and where everything is dissolving. Hence, Wicca can be seen as a creative response to modernity and a creative way to try to make order in the chaos. The way they take control is through practicing magic.

Wicca is a way of life, but it is not an easy way to live, according to Lisa. It is a hard spiritual path because it involves facing problems and changes that one sees as negative sides into positive qualities. One has to destroy one's old self and change undesirable personal characteristics into something useful and valuable in order to accomplish harmony. Whether this is hard or not, is of course dependent on each individual's personality. Lisa told me that:

I had to face a few barriers. I used to be a very aggressive person and I disliked this side of myself. However, I am still aggressive but I have come to accept this part of myself and I am still working on it. After I discovered Wicca I have had to work on my insecurity. You see, it is the insecurity that makes me aggressive. I accepted this part of myself and started to think about it in order to control it. I stopped being aggressive for no reason, and I grew as a person. I gained a new understanding of myself. I am still not the most perfect human being in the world and I still have weak sides, but working with yourself is something you do little by little and for me it is an important part of being Wicca. In the beginning you have to learn to know yourself and that's a hard process. I am content with the work I have done. I got rid of some paranoia and a lot of insecurity. Now I am a happier person that gets happy from the small things.

Practising Wicca has helped Lisa to know herself and to change her self. She was insecure and Wicca has given her the opportunity and self-confidence to change. She is now more confident and familiar with the negative and undesired aspects of her personality, which in turn makes her capable of changing them. The insecurity inflicted by modernity calls for healing. This might be seen as if she is healing the wounds inflicted by modernity.

Magic as therapy

The practice of magic is a way to control one's surroundings and to gain self-confidence. Marco once said to me: "As you might have noticed, pagans are more self-confident than other people". According to Luhrman (1987), the ability to change is an important aspect of magic. Self-knowledge is an important and necessary tool in order to effect that change. As Luhrman puts it:

"Magical practice turns on the assumption that the ability to control the physical world arises through disciplined religious apprenticeship in which experiential, image-bond self-knowledge confers that power. This knowledge is not a body of objective facts but a process of understanding, a way of knowing"

(Luhrmann 1989: 257).

Self-knowledge becomes a method to master life and to gain knowledge about the world. The world is seen as uncontrollable and magic is used to gain some control. Through magic the Witches work on their inner qualities and achieve contact with the divine. Magical practice is therapeutic because it helps practitioners to handle their fears, strong emotions, anger, and irrationality (Luhrman 1989). Helen Berger uses Foucault's concept, "technology of the self", when referring to magic as practised today by modern Witches, because most magical practices are intended to alter the self (1999).

Susan Greenwood (2000) links magic to psychotherapy just as Levi-Strauss linked psychotherapy to shamanism. He claimed, according to Greenwood, that the shaman was able to articulate the patient's illness in a way that made it coherent with the patient's worldview. Greenwood claims that magic operates in the same way. The "western magicians,[...], order their psychic universes by working on their own healing; and in the process their worldview is changed" (2000:117). When the Witches change, their worldview will change simultaneously. This change is connected with the otherworld and Greenwood (2000) emphasises the otherworld as a focal point of knowledge, wisdom and power. However, both Luhrman (1989) and Greenwood (2000) see magic as therapy, and during the process the worldview of the practitioner changes.

Maria claimed that she has grown as a person and is now more confident than she was before she started to practice Wicca. One evening we went to a bar where we had been many nights before. On that occasion there was a group of young people of sixteen and seventeen years old, dancing on the tables. Maria looked at them and said: “when I was their age I could never have done the same. I was too shy and embarrassed. I used to be very shy before I found Wicca, but then I worked with my self and my self-confidence and now I feel much more confident.”

Symbols are an important part of the magical worldview and practice. Different magical symbols appearing in dreams and minds are linked to the symbols of Tarot, runes and astrology (Luhrman 1989). These links are used to explain the meaning of various occurrences in their lives. My informants use Tarot cards and other means like runes and astrologic charts to talk about personal concerns. When using Tarot cards they ask a question about something they wanted to know more about, often involving love, and then use the card reading as a basis for further discussion on that specific topic. It is a way to understand and explain. “It is as if magicians learn a new language in which to talk about their world, and gain a new set of possibilities to organizing it” (Luhrman 1989: 245). The worldview changes as the Witch changes and along with that they develop other tools with which to understand and interpret the world as they experience it.

Galina Lindquist (1995) argues that people use, what she calls, cognitive maps to interpret experiences and to structure how we perceive the world, and that these maps are constructed by experiences attained through participation in a group or a culture. The different experiences we go through feed our cognitive maps. New experiences must be compared with and confirmed by a reference group and if the experience corresponds with already existing maps and frames of understanding, the map will be reinforced. If the already existing maps and the reference group cannot explain the experience, one has to find another reference group that can provide the necessary frames of understanding in order to interpret the new experience. New cognitive maps are created within these new frames of reference and this is, according to Lindquist, “[...] what happens when people

undergo religious conversions, join sects or adopt alternative all-embracing, religion-like ideologies” (Lindquist 1995:10).

The Witches worldview and explanatory models change and many of my informants explain occurrences and incidences as necessary happenings because everything, both good and bad, happens for a reason. The reason is often believed to be that one must learn from incidents and occurrences in order to achieve inner growth. It is believed by some of my informants that occurrences both in this life and in previous lives contribute to this. When something negative, sad or terrible happens, my informants say that it is easier to deal with it because there must be a reason why it occurred. Sometimes, it is believed that it is the goddess that initiates the occurrence in order to open one’s eyes and hence lead one on to the right path, or because one needs a challenge in order to grow. Through the practice of Wicca, a way to analyse, interpret and understand the world is developed. This in turn makes the religious practice more meaningful. A set of ideas and frames of interpreting and explain occurrences take form, and make the Witches feel in control of their environment.

One of my informants was involved in a serious car accident a couple of years ago. She stayed in the hospital for three months and then moved back to her parents’ house in order to recover. Her car crashed into a rail on the side of the road on a section without curves or other obstacles of any kind. She does not remember anything about the accident and the police do not know how it happened. She was talking to another Witch about the accident who explained that it was inflicted by the goddess, because my informant probably had to evaluate her life, and by being in a serious accident she was given the opportunity to rethink and reappraise it. Even though the accident was bad she survived, and by explaining it in this way she also found a meaning as to why it happened: It happened in order for her to learn. Their cognitive maps directed their explanations towards the accident being a sign from the goddess. Earlier experiences that form their cognitive maps, which again have been implemented through the practice of Wicca, gave them the needed frames of reference to explain the accident in a meaningful manner. In discussing the accident and by their agreement they both had their cognitive

maps confirmed by each other, which in this case would be those of their reference group, and thereby also manifested their belonging and confirmed that they had something in common. A Catholic would probably interpret the accident in the same way; that God inflicted the accident. What is important with Wiccan interpretation is to perceive the accident as a learning experience and not as punishment.

Magical names

A magical name is a special name that most practitioners take at least once while practising. It can be changed as many times as desired and many practitioners do not take a name until they find one that they feel is the one for them. The name is personal and should reflect aspects of their personality or certain aspects of their inner growth that they are working on at that moment or a phase they are going through. The important aspect when choosing a magical name is that the name should mean something special to the person that carries it. It is also believed that they have to choose the name cautiously.

Some of my informants, such as Simone, have a magical name that is kept secret and is used only in rituals. He has several magical names that he uses in different contexts and different situations. But to him it is important to keep his ritual name secret, because it is believed to strengthen his contact with the divine if he does so.

When the names are kept secret and only used in the context of rituals, I propose that the name is used as a distinction between the sacred and the profane. The circle, as I discussed in the previous chapter, sets the action apart from other actions and creates a ritualised environment. When the name is used only in magical settings it is sacred and puts them in the right mood. The name will thus be one of the sacred symbols that induce moods and motivations.

However, most of my informants do not keep their magical names secret and it is, in addition to being used in rituals, also used in different settings such as on the Internet, in discussion groups or mailing lists, and when meeting other pagans or Witches. Marco

often presents himself with his magical name and uses it in most settings. Some people even know him only by his magical name.

Since the name is viewed as important it often takes some time finding a magical name that one feels comfortable with. Maria has not yet found a name, and she is still waiting to find the right name.

How a name is chosen / How names choose you

Magical names can be chosen in many different ways. Some ask for a vision, a sign or a dream where a revelation of a name will appear. Others use nature to create their magical name. They choose a magical name that is their sacred animal, an herb or a tree or some other name that it is possible to find in nature. In other arenas Witches look for magic names within areas that they have a special interest in, such as different mythologies. Others choose names that relate to their personality or gods or goddesses that represent a quality that they will work on or a special inner quality that they will try to achieve and need help from the god or goddess that represents that quality. If so, the magical name will be an important part of magic as therapy. If the magical name is either a god's or a goddess's name that is believed to inhibit certain aspects, one will always feel close to the god or goddess, which in turn gives strength.

Since individuals change their magical names as they change into what they consider to be a better person, the name reflects their identity and it reflects what they wish to be. It reflects the individual at that specific time and phase of life. In this way, magical names can also be seen as narratives, or as symbols of personal narratives of growth, change, and success.

Lisa chose her present name, Oya, because it was presented to her in a dream. In her dream she was walking in a desert and suddenly it started to rain. Flowers grew in a luminous line on the ground that became visible when the rain stopped. Throughout the dream she heard a voice whispering Oya in the background. When she woke up she did

not understand the meaning of the dream, but after a week of pondering she realised that Oya chose her and the name had revealed itself to her in the dream.

According to Lisa, Oya is a divinity from Nigeria; the temptress of lightning and a divinity for fertility, hence the rainmaker. Since the dream displayed the signs of Oya being present, Lisa was convinced that the purpose of the dream was for her to choose this as her magical name. Another reason why Lisa considers the name to be right for her is that she has always had a predilection for Africa. Oya is thus a name that has a special meaning to her because she feels a special bond to Africa and it came to her in a dream. She believes that the name chose her as much as she chose the name. She now uses Oya in her coven, in rituals and on the Internet.

Lisa has changed her magical name three or four times. One of the previous names was Elsbek. It is a name that Lisa believes represents her perspective on life since E as a mathematical symbol represents her way of living. For her, E symbolises living in every moment and to be mentally present in all activities. She had never heard the name before, but chose it because it just “came to her mind”.

Both of the names mentioned here are names that represent aspects of Lisa. She has chosen magical names that she can identify with. Again we can see how cognitive maps direct her explanations of the dream and of why she has chosen the different names that she has.

Another one of my informants, Monica, believes that she was both given and that she chose her name. She is a woman in her forties and she has been practising Wicca for about 17 years. After a difficult childhood she renounced all religions and became a feminist. But while she was working on feminist issues “[...] it unveiled to me the other side of ‘sacred things’”, and she joined Wicca.

My magic name is Sheela. It recalls the "Sheela na Gig": they are statues of naked female bodies carved from 12th to 16th century in France, England and Ireland²². You can find them on the walls of churches, castles, mills etc. They seem

²² Sheela na Gig are female exhibitionist carvings often with enlarged genitalia. Most of them are dated from the middle ages. There are four main categories of interpretations of these figures; fertility icons,

to be the veiled door between two faces of the Goddess (the Crone of Winter and the Maiden of Spring), the moment when the two energies are balanced, the figuration or the portal of life, the white paper waiting to be written, and the moment of silence before singing. I heard that name in a whisper, while I was drawing a spiral on the front door of my house²³. So I think I chose it, and it was given to me at the same time (Monica).

Their cognitive maps direct how they see and interpret symbols, which is evident in these examples. Both Lisa and Monica interpret the dream and the whisper as signs or manifestations of their magical name given to them by the goddess. The context reinforced their interpretation and indicated that the magical names were choosing them, and not the other way around.

The narratives that Witches tell, both about how they have chosen to become Witches or how they have always been Witches, and the stories they tell about how they chose or were chosen by their magic name, are all similar. They narrate themselves into a group with the same narratives in order to reinforce their cognitive maps by having them confirmed by their reference group. When telling the same stories, they reflect and signal to the other members of the same reference group that they have the same worldview and the narratives reflect how the individuals understand themselves.

Legitimation

In many of the narratives of how practitioners found Wicca or became a Witch, it can be seen how the religion is justified and made reasonable. In these stories the majority legitimise their religion through childhood experiences and an early interest in magic. Also, the choosing of their magical name is legitimised by way of a childhood interest. Lisa said that her magical name is taken from African mythology because she has always

warnings against sins of the flesh, representative for a figure from the old Celtic goddess trinity, and protection against evil (<http://www.members.tripod.com/~taramc/myths.html>).

²³ The spiral is an important symbol in Wicca. It symbolizes the spiral of life and the reincarnation of all things.

felt an attraction to Africa. Clara's childhood interest for magic was initiated when her mother gave her a deck of Tarot cards. Additionally, Lisa claims that her father is the reason why she has always been interested in magic. She told me that her father has always been interested in esoteric literature and literature about magic. He gave her books on these topics and hence she became interested in them too.

A similar way of legitimising becoming a Witch is to believe that actions and performances come naturally, and not as something that has been learned. For instance, during the workshop several rituals were conducted. One man in his mid-twenties was leading one ritual as the high-priest, together with a woman in her early forties who was on this occasion the high-priestess. During the ritual he and the high-priestess performed the great rite; the symbolic unification of the goddess and the god. He lifted the athame, the ritual knife, and put it down in a glass of red wine held by the high-priestess. Afterwards, he explained that it just came naturally and that he had never learned it or read about it before. This way of explaining certain happenings or activities is typical: They are believed to be natural.

The way the Witches explain and legitimise their religion also contains similar stories. When being able to understand and accept these stories as valid, they share the same worldviews and therefore narrate themselves into a symbolic community.

Summary

In this chapter I have depicted how my informants became Witches, how they discovered Wicca, why they wanted to search for a new religion, and what being a Witch represents to them.

There are different ways of acquiring knowledge about Wicca. Most of the young individuals that join Wicca have discovered the religion on internet after the interest has been triggered by movies or television-series based on witchcraft. Many practitioners claim that they have always been Witches and found the name for it by coincidence. When they discovered Wicca they felt as if they "have come home". The narratives of

how they discovered Wicca and their experiences with being a Witch are similar. I have argued that what they do is to narrate themselves into a social context.

The Catholic Church is often one of the reasons for why the practitioners started to search for a new religion. They felt as if they could no longer identify with the Church and the Church is not able to provide what they require for their personal and spiritual needs. To become Wicca is an active choice. The practitioners claim that they no longer identify with the Catholic Church, but they still feel religious. Instead of accommodating the Church they choose to break with it and find an alternative, and this, I believe, takes courage.

According to the practitioners, a Witch is a person who is in harmony and balance with nature, her or himself, and other people. It is through magic that this is a goal they strive to achieve or accomplish. I have shown how magic can be a form of self-therapy. The magical practice helps the practitioners to work on the parts of their personality that they see as negative. In this way they reinforce their self-confidence and become what they see as better persons. What I have argued is that this is a way to take control of one's own life and that it is a response to modernity.

Through the magical practice their worldview changes, as do their explanatory models. Their cognitive maps change and these maps are reinforced through social interaction with other practitioners. Hence, their sense of belonging can be reinforced.

The narratives told by the Witches are often similar. Due to the similar stories the practitioners recognise each other, and in this manner they can narrate themselves into the same social context and thus feel as though they have something in common. Their sense of belonging is confirmed.

8. ME AND COMMUNITY

“Among the most important aspects of the symbolisation of identity in this respect is that it allows individual diversity and collective similarity to co-exist within the same social space”

(Jenkins 1996:114).

Introduction

According to Vered Amit and Nigel Rapport, anthropologists in the last four decades,

“have tended to privilege an ethnicized paradigm in which community is treated first and foremost as an ascribed identity, one that may well be devoid of social content even while it is symbolically marked in terms of oppositions between insiders and outsiders.”

(Amit 2002b:165)

Rapport and Amit want to rethink the concept of community. Rapport claims that each individual narrates their own identity, and community or culture does not determine individuality. He emphasizes the individual agency and imagination necessary to create an identity within the framework of a social context, although sceptically.

Correspondingly, individuals will not be reduced to their membership in collectives such as communities, cultures, or societies. The ideal is, according to Rapport, that communities are voluntary communities. In practice, however, the community will be imposed upon and restrict the choices of individuals (Rapport 2002a). Vered Amit agrees with Rapport, but for her the important issue is how individuals establish the social connections that answer their needs. Belonging emerges in the daily contact with other people (Amit 2002a,b). For Rapport it is important how individuals can escape membership of communities and enjoy the freedom to experience their worlds of imaginative construction (Rapport 2002a,b).

In this chapter I will discuss how practitioners of Wicca and pagans construct communities and a sense of belonging, even though they rarely or never meet. Their identity as Witches or pagans are chosen and not ascribed. They choose to become members of the community and achieve social connections that answer their needs. When creating a community they reinforce both their collective and individual identities. Through the use of symbols, the restraints on their individual agency are not experienced as being restrained by the collective. In contrast to Amit, I will argue that a sense of belonging can emerge without daily face-to-face contact. My informants' relations with other Witches are often fragmented, and are characterised by loose bonds, and not by interaction on a daily basis. Although some of my informants are members of a coven that meet regularly, a majority practice solitarily. Nevertheless, all feel a connection to a greater "imagined community" (Anderson 1983). What I intend to examine in this chapter is how this community is created.

Helen Berger in *A Community of Witches* (1999) argues that although neo-pagans do not experience long-term face-to-face interaction, which is the definition of a traditional community, they must still be seen as a community. The Internet and the possibility of travelling long distances have given people the opportunity to form communities based on common interests and political consensus, as an alternative to ethnicity, blood ties or locality. "Although the Witchcraft community is amorphous with unclear boundaries, it helps to define ritual practices, beliefs, and behaviours – taking the place, in some ways, of the denomination of other religions" (Berger 1999: 125). Further she argues that it is in the covens that Witches foster their magical worldview and other lifestyle choices, and it is where they are trained to be a part of the larger neo-pagan community. The community that the Witches construct is based on common interest (Berger 1999).

In this chapter I will focus on how Wiccans and pagans in general construct communities based on common interest. Even though there is no dogma in a traditional sense, they do have a common worldview and the symbols that constitute meaning are shared, which creates a sense of belonging to a community. I argue that what the Witches

have in common are the symbols that they share. These symbols provide the possibility of making meaning, and therefore the Witches have what Anthony Cohen (1985) defines as a symbolically constructed community. Cohen argues that a community is not necessarily based on ethnicity, locality or blood-ties, and when he tries to understand community he tries to capture the members' experience of it. In a community the members believe that they make a similar sense of things, and they think that the way they sense things differs from other peoples' senses elsewhere (Cohen 1985).

Identity is produced through differentiating one self from others (Cohen 1985). Identity is also conditioned through its ongoing interaction with others (Giddens 1991). Therefore, through interaction one constructs differences and hence creates identity based on that distinction. Construction of identity takes place on the boundaries between oneself and the ones that are different from oneself. How identity is constructed by emphasising difference and boundaries will be discussed in the next chapter.

However, I propose that it is not only this difference that constitutes identity. Identification with others and a sense of belonging to a community will reinforce and empower their identity as Witches. I will use Cohen's definition of community as a symbolic and cognitive concept, which is created symbolically.

“Community is that entity to which one belongs, greater than kinship but more immediately than the abstraction we call ‘society’. It is the arena in which people acquire their most fundamental and most substantial experience of social life outside the confines of the home. In it they learn the meaning of kinship through being able to perceive its boundaries – that is, by juxtaposing it to non-kinship; they learn ‘friendship’; they acquire the sentiments of close social association and the capacity to express or otherwise manage these in their social relationships. Community therefore, is where one learns and continues to practice how to ‘be social’”

(Cohen 1985: 15).

When Cohen refers to a community as a place where one learns how to ‘be social’, he refers to people acquiring “the symbols which equip them to be social” (Cohen 1985:16). The boundaries that set out the community are created through social interaction. I will argue that the community Witches are a part of is symbolic, but that they construct a sense of belonging by symbolic action and not necessarily through social interaction. These symbols provide meaning and identity, and are distributed not merely by social interaction between the members, which is in opposition to Amit (2002). They are also distributed through indirect interaction, such as books and the Internet. This is why, as I will argue, Witches recognize and feel as they have something in common with other Witches even though they have never met or do not interact socially with each other. This can be exemplified by this quote from Lisa, “Wicca in Italy is a growing environment. It is an environment that gives you the possibility to know people from other cities and regions. You feel you have something in common with people that you have never seen before or would get to know otherwise. It is a kind of sisterhood”

A sense of belonging is an important issue for a majority of my informants and this is expressed in many ways and not always directly. Sometimes it is depicted through indications, such as when Maria and I were listening to music on the radio and she said; “I am sure that she (the artist) is one of us”. Maria recognised the artist as being Wiccan. This recognition of others is an important aspect of the practice. Symbols such as the pentacle are carried by some of my informants in order to be recognised by other Witches. When recognising someone because of symbols, it will intuitively create a sense of sharing something that others do not take part in, and thus leads to a sense of belonging.

Individuality is important in Wicca, and while emphasizing individuality conflicts do arise when groups of practitioners gather. It is also difficult for beginners to locate other practitioners in order to have someone to practice together with. If they find individuals or a group to practice with, it is difficult to be accepted. The need for being independent and at the same time being a part of a group or a community creates

problems. I intend to show that different solutions and different strategies are employed to create a feeling of belonging to a group or a community on different levels.

In this chapter I will first depict the way communities are created. I will not only deal with Wiccans but also with pagans in general, and I will depict how my informants meet and create networks and sometimes friendship. Then I will give an account of initiations, as a part of symbolic construction, and as an example of how groups sometimes are required to be able to perform certain rituals, and how this is possible. I will elucidate the conflicts present in the environment, which create obstacles and hinder the creation of a community other than in the symbolic sense.

Symbolic community

In *Symbolic Construction of Community* Anthony Cohen (1985) emphasises how communities are symbolically constructed as systems of values, norms, and moral codes aiding conduct. The symbols that construct the community also provide a sense of identity and meaning to its members within a restricted whole. “Symbols do not as much express meaning as give us the capacity to make meaning” (1985:15). His model of the symbolic construction of collective and shared identities helps us to understand how people construct a sense of themselves and their fellows as belonging in a particular locality or social setting with each other.

The symbols function in three different ways. Firstly, the symbols generate a feeling of shared belonging. Secondly, the community is a symbolic construction in itself, and thirdly, as a member in a community you share a sense of things with others. An important aspect is that members *believe* that they share the same beliefs, not necessarily that they actually do. It is the sharing of symbols that enables them to believe that they do share something, which makes them a part of a community or gives them a feeling of coherence with others.

Symbols “... ‘express’ other things in ways which allow their common form to be retained and shared among the members of a group, whilst not imposing upon these people the constraint of uniform meaning. Because symbols are malleable in this way they can be made to ‘fit’ the circumstances of the individual. They can thus provide media through which individuals can experience and express their attachment to a society without compromising their individuality.” (Cohen 1985: 18)

Victor Turner argues the same in *The forest of symbols* (1969). He states that symbols are multivocal: The symbols have plural meanings and are not univocal.

When learning the symbols of a community, the members of that community learn to ‘speak’ the same language. According to Cohen, the symbols are effective in creating a community because they are imprecise. By being imprecise they are ideal because then people can “speak a ‘common’ language, behave in apparently the same way, and participate in the same rituals without subordinating themselves to a tyranny of orthodoxy. Individuality and commonality are thus reconcilable” (Cohen 1985: 21). This is also the core of rituals where it is important to work on personal issues. Therefore, when being able to both take part in a community and have room for personal preferences in order to accommodate their own needs, both the need for personal freedom and the feeling of belonging are fulfilled.

My informants often learn the language of Wicca from books. They often read the same books, mostly because books about Wicca available in Italian are limited. When reading those same books they learn to ‘speak’ a ‘common’ language and will therefore recognise other Wiccans, and they will be able to understand the narratives of self that are displayed through symbols even though they do not practice in precisely the same way. When recognising the narrative they will consequently feel as if they have something in common and hence feel a familiarity with each other. This will in turn create a sense of community.

Ritualization (Bell 1992) is, as explored in chapter 6, a way of creating a sense of belonging through embodiment of knowledge communicated in the rituals. Ritualization

will therefore promote the symbolic construction of community. Helen Berger (1999) uses the concept of routinisation in order to explain the standardisation of the religion through publications on the Internet and in books. Routinisation makes it possible to practice alone without a coven, a spiritual guide or a master. Because the religion is routinised, ritualization will take place in rituals both when celebrated in groups and when celebrated alone. The rituals can be seen as symbols that create a community. This is not in the traditional sense of the geographically limited community with daily face-to-face interaction, but as a symbolic community.

According to my informants, Wicca is a religion with a potential for individual growth and development. They claim that one of the reasons for choosing Wicca is that they can practice a religion that meets their personal needs. Wicca is an eclectic religion where the participants practise what they feel comfortable with. When they create a community based on symbols, the symbols make it possible to be a community where the members feel integrated and at the same time their individuality will not be compromised, due to the symbols being imprecise.

Even though the members of a community share symbols they do not necessarily share their meanings. The community is also a symbol in itself that expresses boundaries, and the meanings tied to these boundaries vary with the members' unique relation to the community, but it is still held in common by its' members. Therefore the community depends on symbolic construction and decoration (Cohen 1985). The members need to agree on the symbols that are used to construct the community.

Creating a community

Amy Simes (1995) has conducted a study of pagans in Britain, and she claims that pagan organisations can be roughly divided into three categories: The first category is of purposive or networking groups, the second is of working or ritual groups and the third is of the social group. Groups of the first variety meet for a specific purpose, such as to facilitate contact between pagans, provide a forum for discussions and make information

available. Groups of the second, working or ritual groups, are ones that meet in order to perform a ritual or magic. These are either closed or open groups where not only members can participate but also new individuals can take part. Wiccan covens are often closed. The third category, the social group, can include a subgroup of either of the other two, due to the fact that pagans rarely meet just to be social (Simes 1995). These categories are diffuse and not clearly distinguished. They are all present in my field in various degrees. Pagan Pride Day and workshops, which can be placed in the two first categories, are present. My informants meet mostly for a specific purpose, such as celebration of sabbats. Those who are members of a coven where friendships have developed, also meet solely for social purposes, but mostly they meet for a specific reason. Simes' categorisation is relevant here because Wicca in Italy is starting to grow and this categorisation helps in differentiating the various kinds of groups of pagans and Witches that are emerging.

There are different arenas where a sense of belonging can be created. Pagan Pride Day, which is always celebrated on the 21st of September or close to it, is an opportunity to meet other pagans and Witches. The 21st of September is the autumn equinox, one of the sabbats. Pagan Pride Day is an American concept, and has been organised three times in Italy since 2001²⁴. In the USA it was first arranged in 1998 as a project to spread enlightenment and information about paganism. Also in Italy the PPD is arranged in the interest of enlightenment, information and education, in order to eliminate prejudices and discrimination due to religious faith, and to create a meeting place for pagans. The event is international and in 2002 it was arranged in 8 different countries and in 45 American states²⁵. In Italy it is arranged in Rome each year. About 25 individuals participated in the first Italian PPD. The year I attended was the second year it was organised and about twice as many, 50, participated.

The PPD took place in a big public park in Rome. I went by car from Bologna together with Clara, Rosalinda, Sara and Angela. When we arrived we had some trouble

²⁴ At the time of writing, June 2004.

²⁵ www.paganpride.it 25.9.03

finding the place because it was partly hidden behind trees, and there were no signs indicating where to go. The 35 people who had already arrived were hanging around, some had gathered in small groups of 5-10 individuals and yet others were walking around mingling. We were given a glass of *grappa* and wrote our names in the guest book. When talking to the participants I found that some of the people knew each other already and others did not know anybody. Some had been practising Wicca and other pagan religions for some time, others were searching for a religion and therefore curious about the PPD, and others were just curious. The organisers were dressed in cloaks and other garments inspired by the Middle-Ages. Many of the participants wore black clothes, some wore more hippie-inspired clothes, and the rest wore ordinary clothes. They were about as many women as men and were aged between 16 and 45, though most of them were under 30 years old.

A communal lunch was served, and the food, that had been prepared in advance, was placed on large carpets on the ground. Most of the people gathered around these carpets, while eating, and used the time to get acquainted. Both before lunch and after there was time for people to mingle and talk. Different groups gathered and discussed various topics. I went around and listened to the discussions, and the most frequent issue was prejudice and discrimination against pagans. It seemed like it was a common problem among those participating in the discussion. One of the groups was also discussing what pagans actually believe in. Because there are different paths of paganism and the practitioners are eclectic there are variations in beliefs. However, they were trying to find a common ground and a common basic belief.

During the day four seminars were held, with issues including an introduction to different runes and how to use them in divination, different relaxation techniques to use in meditation, esoteric religion, and basic information about nature religions. The participants could choose and participate in any seminar of interest. Since it was a sabbat, in order to celebrate, the day was concluded with a public ritual. The ritual was elementary and had been adjusted so that everyone who wanted to could participate. As a preparation to the ritual a sheet of information, and a description of the ritual with the text

of the ritual and the succession of the different elements of the ritual, was handed out. Since it was virtually only the basic structures and no personalised elements that were included, the participants could ascribe their own meaning to it. Sara participated while Angela and Rosalinda did not. Sara thought that participating in the ritual was fine because she was able to carry out her own tasks; to talk to the goddess in her own manner about her own issues. She was able to personalise the ritual, even though she was participating in a communal ritual. Although the participants had discussed the core values of paganism and could not agree, they could still participate in the same ritual. This indicates that the symbols are important, and the way to perform a ritual is one of the symbols that create the community.

The PPD is an occasion where pagans can gather and meet likeminded people. They are part of a collective in which they have the opportunity to discuss problems they meet in everyday life and discuss philosophical questions, or practical questions regarding religious practice. It is a setting where one can expect to meet other individuals with the same experiences and similar stories as oneself.

One of the participants, a man in his mid twenties, arrived rather late. He had been looking for us for some time but got lost in the park. When he finally found us he was very content. According to him, it was satisfactory to finally meet someone with the same thoughts as himself because before he found out about the PPD he felt alone with his thoughts and had no one to share them with. For many years he had been a devoted Catholic but one day he started to think that there might not be only one God and he also questioned a lot of the other Catholic practices and beliefs, such as the morality and the power of the Church. His narrative is similar to other narratives as described in chapter seven. Therefore, the telling of the story might imply a learned experience and thus telling his story makes him feel an insider.

The main purpose of the PPD is to give information about pagan religions and practice, but also to create a place where pagans will meet other pagans. Why, then, are so few people coming to these events? A possible answer is that PPD is still a new arrangement in Italy and that the organisers have not done much publicity. Another

reason could be that many practitioners of Wicca live in other parts of Italy and therefore cannot afford the journey, or that they are young and still live with their parents. Vanth, the founder of PPD in Italy, wants to organise PPD in more places across Italy, in order for more people to have the opportunity to participate. He thinks that, “even if I think it is nice to meet pagans from all over Italy, the main purpose of PPD is to help pagans in Italy to meet and make contact. And this would be more effective if they could also meet regularly throughout the whole year. It is nice to meet people from the south and north of Italy and these people I will meet again next year. But the people I can interact with are the people who live in areas closer to where I live. Therefore several small meetings rather than one big one would be more appropriate for us.” If the PPD should expand and be organised in more places, the participants would have the opportunity to meet other pagans from their own region. In this way a social network could develop easily because of shorter distances and the knowledge that there are people practising Wicca or paganism in the neighbourhood. It would then be easier to meet at different occasions and celebrations such as rituals like sabbats and esbats, and it could also be possible to start a coven.

At present the organisers pay for the event out of their own pockets. The participants bring canned food or dry food as a gift or ‘payment’. The food will be used to prepare the communal meal at the PPD the following year. There is no economic profit for the organisers, and neither can they apply for economic support because pagans are not registered as an organisation. Hence, there is an economic problem in organising the event in more places.

Next below, I will describe a marriage or “handfasting”, as pagans call it, which I witnessed on the PPD. I will argue how this ritual shows that symbols are important in the creation of communities.

Handfasting

A young couple was to be ritually wedded at the PPD²⁶. All those who attended the PPD gathered under the cluster of trees where the ritual was going to be performed in order to participate at the ceremony as spectators. A circle was made with leaves on the ground, and Celtic music was playing in the background. Then the high-priestess, Laura, entered the circle and drew an imaginary circle in the air with a bough over the circle that had already been made on the ground in order to open it. She called the four quarters, starting in the east and ending up in the north, with her arms towards the sky, called the spirits and asked them to guard them, be with them and protect them during the ritual. While calling each of the quarters she drew a pentacle in the air with an athame, a ritual knife, and then she called the four elements. While Laura opened and consecrated the circle, the high-priest, Silvio, stood behind her in the middle of the circle leaning on a wooden stick, and the bride and groom waited on the outside of the circle. When the circle was ready the couple could enter.

On the altar in the middle of the circle was a grail of brass, a decanter with wine, a stick of incense, a white candle, some ribbons and the wedding rings. The four people sat down by the altar; the bride and groom on one side and the high-priestess and the high-priest on the opposite one. Laura and Silvio each recited a speech before the bride and groom said some words to each other. They were talking quietly, almost whispering, so it was difficult for us to hear their words. The rings were placed on the athame and Laura walked around the circle and blessed the rings in each corner by drawing a small pentacle in the air above the symbol of the elements, placed in their corresponding corners. She started in the east with the air, and walking clockwise ended in the north. The others stood behind her. When the rings were blessed by all the elements, they all went back to the altar, sat down and the couple put the rings on each other's fingers.

²⁶ Although they are ritually married, they are not legally married.

The couple laid their hands on top of each other and Laura and Silvio lashed a red, white, and blue ribbon around their hands. Laura poured red wine into the grail. She lifted the grail to the height of her breast. Silvio held the athame with both hands on the handle and lowered it down into the grail. This act is called the great rite and symbolises the sexual unifying of the god and the goddess. It is the symbolic act of ritual intercourse between the high-priestess and the high-priest who, during the ritual, represent the goddess and the god.

Then, the newly wedded couple held the grail together and took one sip each. The rest of the wine was poured on the ground in libation. Before the ribbons were removed and put in the grail Laura blessed the hands, still tied together, with the athame. She declared them ritually married; “*adesso siete una coppia!*”, you are now a couple. While the great rite was performed there was silence. No birds were singing and no crickets were chirping as they were throughout the rest of the ceremony. The silence of that very moment was looked upon by my informants as a sign of the presence of the goddess and the god.

In the handfasting ritual one can trace the same structures as in the previous ritual. Most of the rituals can be performed alone, but certain rituals such as handfasting need more participants. In people’s experience, the reality of community will exist permanently and inseparably in their attachment to the community or to a common body of symbols (Cohen 1985). Cohen’s definition of community is that a community is a place or a space where one learns norms, values and moral codes and continues to be social. In chapter six I argued that socialisation takes place in the rituals. The rituals will therefore be important in learning the symbols and learning to be social in a certain sense. It will also be important in confirming the symbols.

I was told that the handfasting I observed on the Pagan Pride Day was probably the first handfasting in Italy. On the workshop I attended the second handfasting was performed. I propose that there are at least two reasons why there have been just two handfastings in Italy. It could be because of the need for more than two people in order to perform the ceremony. This need is both of a practical reason and I suggest that it is also

a social reason. Since many pagans have a different religion than the rest of their family, it might be important for them to celebrate together with others as a substitute for their family. In Italy it is common to celebrate large weddings together with family and friends. A Wiccan ceremony, which departs from this tradition in that no family members are likely to be present, represents therefore a potential break with close relations. A second reason is that the few handfastings celebrated in Italy might be an expression of few practitioners.

An important aspect of the ritual is that although many Witches practice alone they are able to perform these kinds of rituals when they meet, and can take part in and understand the significance of the ritual. Those participating and those observing the ritual were people who normally do not interact with each other. All those present had knowledge of the symbols and they recognised them. They were able to both perform and understand the ritual, even if people do not produce the same meaning. It is the symbols that make it possible for them to participate in the same ritual. The structures of the ritual are symbolic and make the ritual recognisable as Wiccan. Those who know this ‘common’ language will sense that they have something in common and will induce a sense of belonging among them. This information is something they know and that others do not know. It induces a feeling; a feeling of ‘us’ and ‘the others’. Therefore it can be seen as a confirmation of the community and its symbolic value, and of the symbols’ capacity to induce a sense of belonging.

How to meet

Although there are not a lot of meetings among Wiccans in Italy I managed to participate in three other arenas where pagans gathered in order to create a network. One of these arenas was the workshop that I have referred to previously. One of the main purposes of this workshop, besides performing rituals, was to create networks among the participants. During the second day of the workshop we were divided into groups in order to practice the performance of rituals. Those living in the same city or the same region were placed

in the same group with the intention of making it easier to meet and celebrate rituals, form a coven, or just meet for social gatherings after the workshop.

Another purpose of the workshop was to create or develop a confident feeling on the practical level of religious practise. The high-priestess, Phyllis Currot, wanted this workshop to be a step towards a formal initiation into her coven and her tradition of Wicca, The Temple of Ara, which she plans to organise within the next few years. She wanted to do this in order for Italian Witches to be able to lead workshops and courses in Wicca themselves so that it will not be necessary to obtain Witches from abroad. Initiating Italian Witches into the coven of the Temple of Ara, which is an American coven, will hence make them feel like members of this coven in the USA. This in turn indicates the importance of symbols since a face-to-face interaction between people in the USA and Italy will be difficult. They will thus be part of a global network or community. Because the symbols are imprecise they promote and allow a personalised, individual, and local practice at the same time as they generate a sense of belonging.

I was told that there have been organised three or four conferences about Wicca in Italy, most of them in the north. In Britain and in the USA many conferences, meetings and festivals are arranged. In London an informal discussion forum is held twice a month where large groups of more than hundred magicians gather. Other discussion forums are held in London and in other parts of Britain. In addition to these discussion forums there are also different classes to join, and other open organisations and events. There are also various pagan newspapers and journals (Greenwood 2000). It is the same in the USA: There are various pagan journals and newspapers, different groups and organisations, classes, and festivals just as in Britain (Berger 2003). These gatherings are important for meeting other practitioners. In Italy, however, there are few of these gatherings and meetings and only two pagan journals. In December 2002 the second newspaper was released. Pagan Pride was first organised in 2001 and, as far as I was told, workshops were first organised in 1998. The fact that the places for gatherings are few may indicate that Italian Witches and pagans do not have a desire to meet often. It can also mean that there only are 200 or 300 pagans in Italy. As the number of Wiccans and pagans grows,

the number of gatherings and other arenas for the pagans to meet are expanding too. The need to meet once in a while and in order to reinforce and confirm one's identity as a Witch might be asserted.

Some of my informants expressed a wish to create an organisation with the purpose of creating an arena for meeting other pagans on a regularly basis; every second month, or at least two times a year. I was invited to this meeting and several matters were discussed. The first thing to be clarified was how to spread information about the gatherings and avoid giving information to individuals they did not wish to involve. There were people they did not like because of various personal reasons. Another important issue to be discussed were the details and character of rituals to be performed. People of different pagan traditions would be participating, so agreeing on how to perform the rituals was important. The practical aspects of where, who and when were discussed as well. Some people proposed that the meetings could be arranged on ancient sacred pagan spots, where there still are ruins from ancient pagan temples. Others claimed that the land is often owned by private persons and this would bring too many problems. During the meeting I attended, the only thing they could agree on was to have another meeting.

I propose that the difficulties in reaching agreement are due to the emphasized individualism in paganism, which results in different religious practices and beliefs. Everyone wishes to be able to satisfy his or her own needs and it is difficult to agree on anything except the core values. There are no recognised leaders so there is no one to make the final decisions. Even though they cannot agree they do want to create an arena for meeting other pagans regularly, which in turn shows that they do feel as they have something in common. These differences described here indicate the importance of symbols in the creation of a community. The symbols' imprecise meaning allows the members to *believe that they believe the same*, even though they differ in opinions. This is, however, basic in all religions.

Making friends

When not attending PPD or when not being invited to meetings, where do people meet? The Internet is the place where most of my informants meet and ‘talk’ to other Wiccans and pagans. There are different discussion groups and forums where sometimes people agree to meet.

As mentioned before, Maria and Lisa have known each other since they were children. They discovered Wicca individually, but are now a part of the same coven. Through the Internet they met Simona and Cinzia, who also met on the Internet. The four of them are in a coven together and have developed a strong friendship.

Clara is not a member or part of any coven, but she has one Wiccan friend, Francesca. They often perform rituals and spend a lot of time together. As with Maria and her coven, Clara and Francesca also met on the Internet. For some time they used to celebrate rituals with a third girl. On Imbolc, the sabbat celebrated on the second of February, she decided to go out with her boyfriend instead. Clara and Francesca decided then that if she did not find celebrating the sabbat more important than being with her boyfriend, they did not want her in their coven anymore. She was not prioritising the religion and, according to Clara, taking it seriously enough. Another thing they disliked was that she told everybody that she was a Witch, which made both Clara and Francesca sceptical because it is not possible to know how people will react. In order to maintain a friendship one has to practice on the same premises and be equally serious. It may seem that the practitioners of Wicca can be strict when choosing who to practice with. This may also be an expression of individuality, because one has to be comfortable with the practice and those one practices with. This may also be why many practice alone.

Many Witches gave each other big hugs and compliments when they met, whether they knew each other or not. At the workshop they were hugging and stroking each other all the time. They shared an intimacy that the Witches who normally practise alone do not experience. People were showing affection for each other, being attentive and encouraging. When they left the workshop they all hugged, kissed, and made promises to keep in touch and to meet again. When saying goodbye they told each other: “*Tu sei la*

dea”, you are the goddess, or “*Tu sei il dio*”, you are the god. I propose that this strengthens their sense of being part of a community, because it is believed that we are all a part of the same energy and that we do all share part of the immanent divinity. By telling each other that they are the goddess, they reinforce the feeling of being a part of a greater whole. Many of the Witches left the workshop with greater self-confidence, and with a stronger faith in the world. They felt ready to deal with their problems and they had developed a more positive view on life in general.

Initiations

There are different kinds of initiation: initiation into a coven, initiation as a Witch, and different rites of passage etc. When being initiated as a Witch, whether in solitude or together with someone else, one is initiated into a community and becomes a part of a group. Initiations can therefore also be seen as a symbolic creation of a community.

Cunningham (2003) argues that until the 1980s one had to be in contact with an initiated Witch in order to learn the practice of Wicca. Since then the religion has changed and it is possible for anyone to learn and practice. One is not dependent on a coven but can initiate oneself when ready. Descriptions of different initiations can be found on the Internet and in various books. The easiest way to be initiated is to say out loud, “I am a Witch”. Also, knowledge about Wicca, the philosophy and practice can be found in various written texts. Most of my informants have learned about Wicca in this manner, and those who are initiated did it themselves, alone in their room, following descriptions of rituals they had found on the Internet.

Francesca, Clara’s friend, initiated herself in her room at her parents’ house and in secrecy when she was 17 years old. She thought the initiation was a little scary, so after she had finished she hid both the instruments used in the initiation rite and herself under the blanket. Normally, she keeps all her candles, oils, incense and other Wicca things in a locked box under her bed.

According to Maria, initiation is not important. She thinks that religion is a private matter that does not need to be formalised through an initiation. If she feels like a Witch, she does not need to be initiated as one. I propose that this is an expression of the individuality that many of my informants find attractive.

From these two examples we can see that there are varying opinions on how to practice and what aspects are important. For Francesca it was important to be initiated even though she did it alone. I suggest that it was important to her, in order to feel part of an imagined community. For Maria, on the other hand, it is not important to be initiated. She believes that knowing she is a Witch is good enough. Creating a group is difficult due to varying opinions. Therefore, the symbols are the only means to create a sense of belonging.

Community and conflicts

The symbols are imprecise and therefore they can lead to conflicts even though the sense of belonging still remains in the mind or bodies of the participants. Among my informants, conflicts arise which make it difficult for them to form large groups.

Teresa had her spiritual training in another southern European country and, according to her, her views on Wicca differ from other Italian Witches. To her, secrecy is an important aspect and Wicca should be a religion of which the practice is kept secret. However, her experience of Wicca in Italy is that secrecy is not so important and neither is being a member of a coven. She gained her spiritual training in a coven in France and had her own spiritual guide who taught her Wiccan philosophy, practice and rituals. For her, the coven is a group of Wiccans who teach each other, and it is a place for trust and friendship. In Italy most people learn from books and very few have a spiritual guide. When she returned to her hometown she wanted to form a coven. In order to create that coven, she needed people who would be comfortable in each other's company. She gathered individuals together that would be interested in being part of a coven, and before

the coven could be formed she invited them to a meeting to discuss certain topics, and to see if they could all thrive in each other's company.

The meeting took place on a dark and rainy November evening in a tea-house in Florence²⁷. We were all sitting in a circle on the floor in a room in the back of the café. The tea-house was closed, so except from the owner who is not a Witch, we had the whole place to ourselves. When he came to serve us tea, the discussion quieted down. Persian carpets covered the floor, cushions to sit on were spread along the walls and on the floor, and Celtic music was playing in the background. There were 12 women (including myself) and one man present. Another man arrived later, so we were 14 people all in all. Most of the participants were in their late 20s and early 30s. Three of the girls were 17-18 years old, and two of the women were around 40 years old. The purpose of this meeting was to get to know each other and to talk about different expectations of a coven. Teresa opened the meeting by telling the others that the most important aspect of a coven is to share knowledge with each other and that every one should contribute with something. This was important to her in order to avoid an uneven feeling of reciprocity which could result in a hierarchy. Only four of the participants had previous experience in working with other Witches or being in a coven. The others had none or very little experience.

Another topic of discussion was whether they should keep the coven a secret or not. Some said that they would tell people that they were members of a coven but not tell them what they were doing. Others again wanted to tell people what they were doing in the coven in order to explain to family and friends about their religion. Others again wanted to keep everything a secret. Their religion was to them secret and personal, they explained. One of the women thought that if Wicca was organised and too much information given out to the public, Wicca would no longer be the same. A lot of the secrecy and magic would disappear. Another woman answered that Wicca is not a religion you can understand, it is a religion you have to feel. Therefore, it is not important to keep information from outsiders, but rather give information in order to avoid

²⁷ A tea-house is a café serving tea.

prejudice. Again, there were different opinions on various issues. However, they still tried to create a coven even though it was difficult for them to agree.

According to Clara, the Wicca environment in Italy is closed; the groups or covens often consist of 3-4 persons and are not open to others. Clara used to be a member of a small coven consisting of five people including herself, but they did not worship the same goddesses and gods as her. Clara is inspired by the Celtic tradition and mythology and the others were more attracted to other traditions. Clara did not see this as a problem, but left the group because she felt that the others were trying to freeze her out and that the atmosphere was cold. According to her, people are 'narrow minded' and prefer to do their own things. They are neither open to nor accepting of other perspectives and other methods of worship. They just do what they think is right. The level of tolerance among Wicca is very low in Italy. According to her, this is one of the reasons why it is so difficult in Italy to create organisations for pagans or Wiccans. Other reasons, according to her, are the Pope being present in Italy, and that there is a lot of prejudice against Wicca and paganism in Italy. Consequently, people practice in secret.

This shows that there are great difficulties when trying to create other communities like cognitive and symbolic ones. Even though personal preferences and opinions differ, it is obvious that a need for belonging exists. Besides the apparent differences they still share symbols and a worldview. Since the symbols are imprecise they make people believe that they believe the same and when they meet this is obvious. Still, they feel a sense of belonging and a sense of having something in common. While sharing the symbols they are able to understand each other and therefore also disagree. They need loose-knit communities that allow for differences.

Summary

I have here described some ways of trying to create networks. There are attempts, but they are not successful since not many people attend these gatherings. However, those who attend and participate want to meet other pagans and when meeting they are able to

understand each other because they share the same symbols. When trying to create a network or a community, they use these symbols, such as at PPD where different people from different pagan traditions and with different experience, meet and feel they have something in common. It is obvious that creating organisations and groups are important. However, it turns out to be difficult because of indifferences and few participants. Italian Witches create communities even though many of them do not have face-to-face relations with other pagans or Wiccans. When they meet, the encounters are occasional, although some people meet on a regular basis and are members of the same coven. Community is expressed through recognition of others, occasional meetings and attempts to create arenas where practitioners can gather. The existing covens and the groups are often closed, and it is difficult for people to become a part of them. Still they have a sense of belonging and this, I have argued, is a cognitive sense and a symbolic sense, as argued by Anthony Cohen (1985). Rapport claims that each individual can create their own identity within the frames of their social context. As shown in this chapter, Wiccans create and narrate their own identities. They also create belonging through symbols, and not, as argued by Amit, through daily interaction.

Routinisation, which Berger (1999) sees as a part of the ageing of Wicca, creates a sense of belonging because each practitioner knows that there are other people practising and belonging to the same religion as they do. Wicca in Italy, however, is too young to be able to talk about ageing. Instead, routinisation implies imitation and dependency on others.

Disagreement and different opinions on different issues regarding religion makes it difficult to create a community other than a symbolic one, as the symbols make people believe that they believe in the same thing. The Witches have problems with leadership, and with recognising the talent of others without letting them gain authority over them. The disagreements vary from how to display their religion and how much information to tell others who do not practice Wicca themselves, to details of religious practice and the difficulties created owing to people being on different levels. Still, the sense of belonging created by the symbolic community is of importance for their creation of identity as

Witches. Cohen argues that it is the shared symbols that provide meaning and identity for its members even though the meaning they attach to the symbols varies.

9. ME AND THE WORLD

“In our relationships with significant others we mobilise identifications of similarity and difference, and, in the process, generate group identities”

(Jenkins 1996:83).

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is how the Witches make their boundaries through stressing differences, in order to make a distinction between themselves as a group, and other groups. Various differences are emphasized, and I suggest that it is through these differences that their collective identity is reinforced, as is their sense of belonging. What differences do they emphasize? I will explore how differences are emphasized in order to create boundaries constituting the community; both the Wiccan community and the pagan community. The boundaries of a social group in a social and cognitive sense, and not territorial boundaries, are taken into consideration. Given that the group is constructed symbolically, I will argue that the boundaries are also symbolic, but with social implications. The boundaries will reinforce the collective identity as pagans and Witches. The way my informants establish oppositions and boundaries in order to create ‘us’ and ‘the others’ will reflect back on how they conceive of themselves and their identities.

Sarah Pike (2001) in *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves* claims that both the senses of collective identity, as well as individual identity among neo-pagans, are strong. Furthermore, she claims that these identities are often forged in conflicts against others, both within the community and outside. Their identities are created on the boundaries expressed through conflicts between pagan and Christians, between sacred and profane space, and between themselves and other neo-pagans. “For Neo-pagans, personal autonomy is both a turning inward to one’s own moral authority *and* the outward expressions of self that takes place in relation to others and within a larger community”

(Pike 2001: 223). Hence, according to Sarah Pike, the neo-pagan festivals exemplify how pagans construct their identities, based on boundaries being created between themselves and others outside the festival area.

In his article *Boundaries and Connections* (2000), Barth, inspired by Lacoff, examines how we use the notion of boundaries and to what extent it influences the way we think and make mental images to think with. The boundaries and differences can be seen as cognitive models that influence the way we think about others. He emphasizes the cognitive aspect of the boundary and wants to separate the idea of boundaries from the idea of categorical distinction. The boundaries as cognitive models will often favour mistrust and stereotypes, which will be manifested in social interaction. According to him “making a distinction does not necessarily entail drawing a boundary” (Barth 2000: 17). Boundaries do connect and separate. It is through the arena of social activities that boundaries connect. Cultural variation is much broader, but the boundary scheme constructs a sense of shared homogeneity within the group and also the cultural differences between groups. It is a dialectic relation between the social processes that lead to the cognitive models and the cognitive models themselves. These cognitive models will also influence the social processes (Barth 2000). Cohen (1985) claims that the collective identity of a community is constructed through the boundaries that come into being when interacting with other social entities distinguished from themselves. “The boundary encapsulates the identity of the community and, like the identity of an individual, is called into being by the exigencies of social interaction” (Cohen 1985:12).

Cohen argues that the boundaries are brought about by meanings characteristic of the community, or by the social discourse of the community. Because of the distinctiveness of these meanings they work also as a provider of a referent for the members’ personal identities, which can be reinforced and expressed through the representation of those identities in social interaction (Cohen 1985). “The symbolic nature of the opposition means that people can ‘think themselves into difference’” (Cohen 1985:117). It is contrast that reinforces one’s perception of one’s self and one’s

identity. This difference refers both to discrepancy within the community, as shown in the previous chapter, and the differences made to other communities or social entities.

From this we can conclude that a community's identity will be an identity based on differences, and hence the boundaries will be of importance. In order to distinguish oneself from others, recognising differences will therefore be as important as recognising similarity. Hence, the identity is based on the construction of otherness and on exclusion based on certain premises; a construction of 'us' and 'the others'. In the previous chapter I showed how identity and community are based on similarities. In this chapter I will show how identity and the sense of belonging are created and reinforced based on differences.

In order to see how the boundaries are constructed. I intend to show this through different empirical examples regarding Catholicism and the Church, and Italian society in general, with the emphasis on my informants' social relations with significant others.

A heightened awareness of the relational and the oppositional nature of collective identities have been influenced by Barth's study of ethnicity, where most notably the emphasis is on boundaries and differences. The boundaries are fluid, and are made valid and important through social interaction (1969). The boundaries are mainly connected to ethnicity, but as the essence of his theory is about how social groups are distinguished from each other through the construction of boundaries, I find it useful also in connection with groups other than ethnic groups, as they all create boundaries.

Barth claims that boundaries between similar groups are blurred and therefore have to be made more explicit than others (Barth 1969). The boundaries are important in order to state a difference and the difference is important to mark a boundary. Witches, through comparing themselves and their beliefs to non-pagans and non-Wiccans, position themselves in relation to others, creating 'us' and 'the others', which reflects back on how they conceive of and perceive themselves.

Oppositions

According to Sarah Pike (2001), many pagans often explain that the reason for becoming pagans was to rebel against their parents and their strict childhood religion. They rebel against the institutionalised western Christian thinking on nature, the body and the role of women in Christian society. Pagans believe that Christianity is to blame for the earth being destroyed, and that the body and sexuality are no longer something holy and natural. They want to create a society with harmony between humans and nature, where sexuality and the body are holy and natural, and where a woman is respected for what she is on the same level as men (Pike 2001). My informants often show the same attitudes as Pike's informants. Their attitudes against the Church are of an oppositional character. According to Clara; "I think that Wicca can be seen as a rebellion against patriarchal society. It also gives both men and women new role models. This does not only happen in Italy, but all over the world. For me Wicca is a religion for women that give us other opportunities to participate than Catholicism does."

The role models offered by Catholicism are role models that Clara thinks of as conservative and not liberal. When practicing Wicca, women can still be religious without following the Catholic teachings. They cross boundaries because they do not feel restricted by what they consider to be the rigid rules of Catholicism, which in turn can be seen as a rebellion.

When my informants talked about Catholicism, they often referred to the Church, and how the Church relates to women, sex, power and morality; and my informants give the impression of being in opposition to these positions. The Church as an institution becomes a natural reference point and a common ground of opposition for all my informants. The differences constitute boundaries and therefore the differences become important.

I met Marco, Paula, and Paula's English husband Robert, in Marco's apartment for an interview. His bookshelf was filled with books about ancient religions, Wicca,

books about goddesses, esoteric books, and various mythologies. My first question was what they could tell me about Wicca in Italy. They started to talk about the PPD since they organise it. Then they moved quickly on to talk about Christianity, the Catholic Church and the Vatican, which they are preoccupied with. Marco and Paula usually talk for hours on the phone about this topic. They consider the Church to have a lot of power because it clouds peoples' minds. Marco and Paula also argued that the Church "tells you from the moment you are born that you are already wrong. And to get away from that you have to go through the authorised people that can take care of God, because you can't. You cannot deal directly with God." This topic is often mentioned in relation to the Catholic Church among my other informants. For Maria it is important to be able to have direct contact with God and to not be dependent of a third person. When she was a Catholic she said she usually prayed to the Virgin Mary and Jesus. She felt God to be judging her.

Marco and Paula see the Catholic Church as powerful because they portray themselves (the priests) as being the instruments of God and they are the only ones with direct access to Him. Marco and Paula also accused the Catholic priests of oppressing the people by not letting them ask questions, and when they do the answer is, "it is God's will". They believe that most people don't ask questions, they just accept things the way they are. According to Marco and Paula, when people start questioning why they perform rituals, such as saying ten *ave Marias*, taking communion, or participating in other pious religious activities, they loose faith in the Church. For my informants, such a disjunction is not satisfying because they want to know why they act as they do, in order to fill their actions with meaning and make their religious activities meaningful.

Another element of opposition to the Church is the women's role in religious life. One of the reasons why many of my informants have been searching for a religion other than Catholicism was because of the role women have in the Church, and consequently how the Church views women. Firstly, women cannot become priests. When Lisa was seven years old and asked the priest in her congregation if she could become an altar boy, he refused. The priest just looked at her as if she had said something wrong. On

discovering that because of her sex she could not do the job of an altar boy, it was difficult for her to be able to identify with the Church. She felt excluded from what she saw as an important part of Catholic practice and therefore felt that there was no place for her in the Church.

Also in language (Italian) Lisa notes how the masculine is prominent. It is visible in the word for God, *il dio*, which is a masculine word. This is annoying for her because it takes away the possibility to identify with the divinity. When God is masculine women have no feminine divinity to identify with. Therefore the goddess is important to her. Symbols, both words and objects, are considered as expressing their identity as a Witch and to show who they are. For the Witches, a symbol is an icon that they consider important, in order to reflect how they see themselves and who they are. It is not only important for the symbol to signal to others who they want to be, but also because they want to feel a reflection of themselves in the symbol.

Sex is the fourth element that was brought up in conversations about the Church. It is common for teenagers in Italy to go to Catechism and be taught by the Catholic clergy about different aspects of sex and family life. Paula's sister went to Catechism for two years. In one class they learned about sex: They were taught they should not use condoms, because every sperm is a life, and wasting lives is wrong. They were also taught to not have sex before marriage. Paula was very upset about this so she gathered her sister and her sister's friends and taught them about sex. She would not risk that her sister would get a sexually transmitted disease because the clergy taught her not to use a condom. Neither would she want her sister to feel guilty for having sex with someone she wanted to have sex with, because, as Paula said, "sex is a natural thing and it is natural for people to want to have sex."

Maria believes that sex and control belong together. According to her, demonising sex is typical of monotheistic and patriarchal societies, because they will then be in control. In other religions, like paganism, sex is something natural. "It is a way to be in control of different matters. Because, when I am in control of your body, I am in control of you. Right?" Maria said. She felt that when demonising sex the Church took power

from women, because when acting in ways not accepted by the Church women would consequently have problems accepting their bodies, and experience fear and shame. “Why should I as an intelligent woman feel guilty and why can women not participate in religious activities?” Maria said. To Maria sex is *una cosa naturale*, a natural thing, not something to suppress and feel guilty about.

According to Lisa, the attitude to sexual behaviour in Wicca is liberal. This is why society has created a stereotype of Witches as individuals that have frenetic sex. Sex is liberated in the sense that one can make one’s own choice of who to have sex with and when, as long as both persons involved consent. She feels that maybe a more suitable description for sex in Wicca is *la libertà*, freedom, or *libertino*, small freedom, not liberated. In some covens and traditions of Wicca, ritual intercourse between the high-priestess and the high-priest, as a symbolic unifying of the goddess and the god, is a natural part of some rituals. This is in order to achieve ultimate contact with the divine, but it is not something that Witches are obligated to do. Lisa has never had ritual sex because she believes that sex is something that is between two persons, and if both parties consent it is something pleasant, and not something to be shared with other people. Since Lisa is quite active on the Internet, she often gets questions about sex from young girls who practise Wicca. She normally tells them to have sex if they feel ready for it and if it is something they want to do. For her it is very important to communicate to the girls that they should not do anything they do not feel ready to do.

My informants felt a need to make their own decisions about wrong and right. They do not want to give this moral responsibility to the Church or other spiritual authorities. Federico²⁸ said; “why should I have to ask for forgiveness for something I have done but do not think is wrong, only because someone else has decided that it is wrong.”

²⁸ Federico is a man in his early twenties. He had been practiced Wicca for a year when I met him in October 2002.

Maria depicted the moral power she believes the Church to have, with a story of a friend of hers. Her friend was pregnant but decided to have an abortion. This girl was a member of a Catholic congregation, and they condemned her, abandoned her and closed the doors to her when she needed them the most. Maria believes that it was the pregnant girl's decision whether to have an abortion or not: It is a private matter for her and in the end it is her choice. An abortion is something society accepts, but not the Church. Maria's explanation to this was that the Church doesn't want to give power to individuals and therefore limits their actions. According to Maria, the Church wants to be the only entity with power to decide what is right and what is wrong. When talking about the Church she refers to the Church as an institution.

All of these stories indicate opposition to the Church. This opposition also increases the separation between 'us' and 'the others' because this opposition implies that Wiccans can think themselves into difference, and thereby provide a reference for their personal identities as they are represented in society (Cohen 1985).

From this it can be concluded that the need to mark their distance from the Church is notable. For some reason they feel the need to mark the difference between themselves and the Church and Catholics more than they mark other differences. I suggest that this is because the boundaries are blurred between the Catholic faith and the Witches faith, as a faith. It may seem that there are many differences between Catholicism and Wicca, however there are also similarities, and I suggest that these similarities create the need for the clear marking of a boundary. Catholicism is the religion that many of the Witches adhered to before they discovered Wicca. Therefore they will need to mark the boundaries more clearly than other boundaries. I suggest that the opposition towards the Church also functions as a symbol that creates their sense of belonging, in being a symbol that expresses what is expected to be a common opinion. Since many pagans and Witches choose to turn away from the Church, it might affect their need to make a distinct distance.

Similarities

The similarities between Catholicism and Wicca often referred to are the historical backgrounds and the symbols that they rearrange. Many of my informants were preoccupied with how the Christians took the pagan religions and made them their own, and hence converted many people. As Lisa said, “most of the Catholic saints are pagan gods and goddesses. Madonna is really the goddess of Christianity.” What the pagans are doing now is merely to reclaim that old religion. According to Maria, the gods and goddesses are, in principle, working in the same way as the Catholic saints. When there is something specific the Witches want to pray for or want help for, they invoke the goddess representing that specific matter. This is the same manner as in which the saints work. The Madonna is often seen as the Goddess of Christianity. She symbolizes all of the virtues the goddess of Wicca represents; the maiden, the mother, and the crone. The Catholics believe that there is a higher God and that the saints are only intermediaries. In Wicca, however, all the named gods and goddesses are aspects of the Goddess or the God and do not serve as intermediaries. So, when praying to one specific goddess, the Witches pray to one aspect of the Goddess and thus have direct contact with the divine. The Witches are therefore not dependent on a third person to achieve contact with the divine, as are Catholics. This historic justification can be seen as a part of their opposition against the Church. They reclaim what they see as a continuous practice that has been used also by the Catholics.

Some of the religious practices performed in Wicca, like lighting candles and incense when praying to the divinities, are also part of Catholicism. When Lisa explained to me why her grandmother is a Witch, a Catholic one, and how she explained it to her grandmother she said, “When I pray to my Goddess I do the same as my grandmother does when she prays to the Madonna. She lights a candle and some incense and puts it in front of the Madonna. I do the same, but I address the Goddess instead of the Madonna. My grandmother is a Catholic witch because she sees things before they happen and she also senses things. We are quite alike, except that she is a devoted Catholic. I was a devoted Catholic too actually, before I chose Wicca.”

Because there are differences and similarities boundaries do not necessarily entail categories. Boundaries are fluid, situational, and not fixed, and are therefore dependent on social interaction (Barth 1969).

It is the Church as an institution and the practices inflicted by the Church that the Witches and pagans are often in opposition to. Many of the popular religious practices are often similar, such as those exemplified by Lisa above. Since the practices are often similar it will be difficult to draw a fixed boundary. When drawing a boundary between Wicca and Catholicism it is therefore not necessarily a categorical distinction.

I also see the similarities as an important aspect of the relationships my informants have with their significant others, in addition to the oppositions. The differences are based on my informants understanding of their surroundings. It is my informants' frames of reference that determine what they see as differences, and what to focus on, with the intention of creating distance, boundaries and categories of 'us' and 'the others'.

Symbols

Witches often use symbols that other people connect with the traditional concept of 'witches', such as black cats, brooms, and small dolls of witches with black pointy hats and warts sitting on brooms. They label themselves as Witches, both in words and with symbols. The pentacle most of them wear is often connected with Satanism²⁹ by people who are not involved in, and have no knowledge of paganism.

I drove to Rome with three Witches, Angela, Sara and Rosalinda, to attend the PPD. Because of the distance between Bologna and Rome we stopped halfway and stayed the night at Rosalinda's house where she lives with her boyfriend. I walked into Rosalinda's room to find it filled with witches in all shapes and sizes. They had black hats, were riding on brooms, with warts on their noses and some of them were pictured

²⁹ Satanism is the worship of the devil, which can not be confused with Wicca since there is no devil in Wicca. The devil is, according to Witches, a Christian invention and therefore can not be a part of the Wiccan beliefs.

with a cat or a cauldron. They all confirmed the traditional picture of a witch. These witches were hanging from the ceiling, on the walls and they were standing on the floor. They were all over the room. Two bookshelves in the room contained books about witches, witchcraft, Wicca, herbs, oils, magic and other occult and esoteric themes. On the wall was a poster with the slogan “Witches do it in circles”, taken from the film “The Blair Witch Project”. In one corner of the room a small altar was placed on the floor with two candles (both white), incense and a small statue of the goddess. In the middle of the room was an open space with a couple of cushions to sit on. In the rest of the house there were small pictures of witches and witch dolls on the walls, on the bookshelves, and on other furniture.

The next day we got up early and got ready to leave for Rome. Rosalinda put on a long, wide skirt and a white blouse and plaited small braids in her hair. When Angela saw her she exclaimed: “*che bella, sembri come una strega*”, you look nice, you look like a witch. Rosalinda seemed very pleased with this comment. Rosalinda expresses her identity through symbols that most of us connect with the traditional concept of ‘witch’.

According to Goffman, when people that do not know each other meet, they will try to create a picture of the other person. In order to do this one has several sources for gathering such information, such as the other person’s appearance and behaviour. The information is thus retrieved from many different sources that are carriers of meaning. Goffman calls these carriers sign-vehicles. If the other person has no points of reference that make it possible to draw on earlier experience, one is likely to use stereotypes when judging the other person (Goffman 1969). The symbols used by Witches, such as those mentioned before, are likely to be used by people they meet as sources of information to create an image based on previous experience with those symbols. Most people connect these symbols with traditional witchcraft, Satanism, other forms of occult religions, or “*Brigade rosso*”³⁰ (the Red Brigade). Therefore they are likely to be connected with these

³⁰ Brigade Rosse is a terrorist communist group that killed many people in the 1970’s. Aldo Moro, a political leader of the PCI, Italian Communist Party, was kidnapped and killed by young terrorists from *Brigade Rosso*. However they still exist in Italy (Sasson 1997).

when carrying the pentacle. The confusion of the symbols' meaning is induced because people have either other experiences with the pentacle or they have no previous knowledge and therefore use stereotypes when trying to retrieve information from the sign-vehicles.

Paula usually goes to the same gym every week and has done so for some time. On one occasion the owner came up to her, pointing at her pentacle which she was wearing around her neck, and asked if she knew what it was and if it was something satanic. Paula felt terrible and now, every time when she goes back to the gym, she knows that this person has a preconception of her. However, she found this strange because she believed this person was closer to her in faith than others, because she knew that he had studied Reiki and I- Ching³¹. But, according to Paula, it turned out that he was more Christian than she first thought. After he discovered the pentacle he changed his attitude towards her. She feels that he behaves coldly and in a more distant way towards her now than before and the situation is not as relaxed as it used to be. Paula is here making a distinction between Christians and others. She paints a picture of Christians as enemies.

Other social settings that my informants perceive the Christians as enemies are in the public. They believe that Vatican and the Church have the power to influence people by not giving them information or by giving misinformation, and thus The Catholic Church is partly responsible for prejudices and misconceptions among Italians in general. Rosa, an informant I met rather late in my fieldwork, had participated in a television program. She is a young woman in her mid-twenties who has practiced Wicca for 8 years. Clara told me about this program many months before I actually met Rosa. Clara described Rosa as a woman who looks like a witch, who wears a lot of jewels with pagan symbols, has long black hair with grey stripes in the front, and black clothes. According to Clara, she was not taken seriously on television, which Rosa confirmed when I met her. Rosa told me that the host asked her if she could do some magic for him, and other

³¹ Reiki and I-Ching are Eastern philosophies and religious practices, alternative practices that are also popular among practitioners of Wicca and other pagans.

questions that she characterized as non-serious and stupid. She told him that Wicca is not like that, but never got the chance to answer or explain anything properly, because every time she tried, her microphone was turned off or she was interrupted. In the same program a theologian was present, who gave no impression of knowing anything about Wicca during the program. Rosa told me that afterwards, backstage, the theologian admitted that she knew Wicca well, but wouldn't say anything about it because if she did, people would not like Christianity any more. I was never told the reasons for this.

My informants believe the Vatican deliberately hold back information in order to suppress paganism and Wicca, so that the stereotypes held by Italians are reinforced. Therefore the Church is seen as an enemy and the need to be distinguished from it are great. 'The others', as in the Church, are thus a distinct group.

Prejudice

According to my informants, the Vatican manipulates and influences peoples' conception of Wicca and paganism in general, by manipulating symbols and displaying them in contexts that may cause false impressions and create bad attitudes towards Wicca and paganism. There was one case in particular that Marco and Paula mentioned. A few years ago a man was arrested for paedophilia in the north of Italy. He picked up young boys, aged between 14-16, from school after school hours, and convinced them to join a satanic sect and had sex with these boys. The story was broadcast on television news accompanied by pentacles, and symbols and pictures, taken from Wiccan internet sites, displayed as pictures and flashes in the background. Marco and Paula worried about this because they believed this might result in Wicca and paganism being connected with paedophilia and Satanism.

Prejudice is a common topic of discussion when Witches and pagans meet. Sara is a woman in her 40's who has been practising Wicca for about three years. When she started to practice it her husband left her. They had been married for 20 years, and according to her, she changed after starting to practice Wicca, which was one reason why

he left her. Another reason was his ignorance of her religion. They have three children together, two girls aged 13 and 16 and one boy that is in first grade. The oldest girl understands what her mother's religion is about, but does not have any interest in it herself. The other daughter does not show any interest at all and does not try to understand it either. The youngest, the boy, however, is curious and Sara claims that he has magical powers. She has tried to explain Wicca to him, but says that he is too young to understand. One day at school he told the other children in his class that his mother is a Witch. The other parents' reactions and prejudice caused trouble for both Sara and her son. It resulted in a parents' meeting where Sara had to explain what her son meant when he claimed she was a Witch. Other people talked about how difficult they find it to be a pagan in Italian society. They all meet negative reactions and feel misunderstood by others who are not pagan.

Reactions from experience, from assumptions, and from belief reinforce the dichotomy between 'us' and 'the others' marked by the boundaries. It also means that Wiccans see themselves as different from others and hence they distinguish themselves and set themselves to one side.

Are the expected reactions likely to occur? When I talked to Italians, other than my informants, about Wicca, they exclaimed things like "*sono pazzi!*", they are crazy, "*Ho paura delle queste cose*", I am afraid of those things. Besides those expressing fear and ignorance, many found it interesting and wanted to learn more. One girl that gave the impression of being scared is from the south of Italy, where witches and other 'superstition' is strongly believed in. Three years ago her father died from a heart attack. It happened suddenly and she believes that there might have been witchery involved. Hence, she is scared of such things as magic and witchcraft. The picture she has of a witch is of the evil village witch that casts spells and gives the evil eye. This traditional picture of a witch in Italy is a picture that contemporary Witches want to change.

Since many Italians have this picture of witches, self-presentation is important. Teresa believed that it could be dangerous to tell anyone because you can never know what kind of people they are. You never know what they will do. "One day they might be

throwing stones at your windows”; she said. “And that is because they see you as dangerous and as a witch in the traditional sense.” Teresa does not call herself a Witch and neither does she make use of the word ‘witch’ when she refers to Wicca. Because of the misunderstandings and stereotypes that arise, she labels herself Pantheist. This is, according to her, a more correct description and a label she feels more comfortable with.

Clara normally presents her self as Wiccan or pagan when people ask her about her religion, although she thinks of herself as a Witch. However, she chooses not to use the word ‘witch’ because of its negative connotations. She said that when people hear “Wicca” or “pagan” they do not know what they are and hence they have an open mind. In contrast, when she tells people that she is a Witch their minds will be closed and explaining becomes difficult because of the preconceptions already established in the other’s mind. However, she likes the word ‘witch’; especially its etymological meaning, which is, according to its adherents, *saggia*, wise.

When the Witches make use of symbols and other sign-vehicles, such as labelling themselves as Witches, which are connected to the preconception of ‘witches’, they mark their belonging to a category, which already exists in people’s minds. Hence, the Witches distinguish themselves from others who do not have the same conceptions of those symbols as Witches have. This sets them apart from the mainstream and separates them from others. To take on certain meanings and at the same time keep a distance from the mainstream opinion, they put themselves in a group, which has certain connotations and is looked upon as being different. The connotations connected to the concept of ‘witch’ often lead to negative reactions from people not involved, and hence confirm to the Witches that they are not a part of the mainstream. They represent something unknown that creates fear and prejudice, and hence their differences from others are confirmed.

Secrecy

According to Jenkins in *Social Identity* (1996), defining various criteria for membership in a group or community is important, as are the differences from others. When defining

criteria for membership, a boundary is created. Those criteria will exclude others and thereby set one selves apart from other communities or social entities. The differences are of importance, because they can be seen as criteria for membership, and therefore only those recognising the criteria will be able to identify with a specific group or community.

Greenwood states that, “magic is ‘the other’ way of knowing; it is hidden, that which is not readily available to the wider society” (Greenwood 2000:135). Not everyone has access to knowledge about magic. Magic is knowledge reserved for those who choose to learn about it. Therefore, knowledge of magic is one of the criteria for being a member of the community of Witches and pagans.

The Witches create a distinction between themselves as an in-group and those not included; the out-group. Therefore they can be seen as liminal, and *communitas* develops (Turner 1991). They see themselves as a group, but always in contrast to someone else. The boundaries are fluid and situational (Barth 1969), so different boundaries will therefore be marked according to what group the difference is to be marked against. Witches mark themselves as a group in contrast to the Church and their families. Both entities become an antagonist and represent a difference that they can be in opposition to, and hence use to create and reinforce their identity as Witches and as pagans.

The Witches relate to their family, friends and other social entities in society. How they relate and interact with others will depict how they create their identity. Jenkins (1996) argues that the internal-external dialectic of identification can be seen to create both a collective identification as well as an individual identity. It is through interaction with others that differences and similarities are identified and group identity generated. Also Cohen (1985), influenced by Barth (1969), emphasizes social interaction as necessary for boundaries to arise. Therefore, examining social interaction is necessary in order to look at the boundaries created.

Most of my informants keep their religion a secret from their families and often also from their other friends. Telling friends and family about being a Witch is seen as difficult by many of my informants, especially by the teenagers. They often experience misunderstanding and have also experienced that their parents and siblings can

sometimes be scared of what they do, due mainly to lack of understanding and confusion, or mistaking Wicca for Satanism. The confusion that arises is often due to symbols such as the pentacle, and because of stereotypes. This confusion is both believed to be and has been experienced as a reaction from others. Some of my informants have told their families about their religion, but most of them do not live at home and it is not a common topic of conversation at family gatherings.

I will now describe how some of the Witches relate to their families regarding their religion. There are, however, differences between the young Witches that still live with their parents and the older Witches that live on their own and have practised Wicca for many years. In Italy there are many teenage Wiccans.

During my fieldwork, when visiting my young informants in their homes, I was told to invent another story for my stay in Italy because their parents did not know about their religion. In the beginning of my fieldwork, Cinzia, Maria and I went to visit Lisa at her parents' house. We met Lisa at the train station and walked there together. Just before we arrived Lisa told me that if her parents asked why I was in Bologna I should tell them that I was an exchange student and went to the same classes as Maria. She explained to me that her parents did not know that she practices Wicca, and she would not tell them because she was afraid they would not understand. Later that summer she told them nevertheless. According to Lisa her father accepts it, but he is not happy because to him Wicca is a world he cannot take part in. This turns Lisa into a daughter that is different from the rest of the family. Her mother, on the other hand, does not like it and she avoids the subject. Her sister does not understand what Wicca is and thinks it is something you can make money from. She has also told her grandmother, whom she lives with, but the grandmother is scared. Her grandmother and mother are afraid because they worry that Lisa is going to meet people that are not of good faith, and they think that Lisa is a person who is easily influenced. However, she claims to be fortunate with her family because, contrary to the conservative Catholic mentality, they have open minds. Still, she thinks that life, as a Wiccan in a Christian family, is difficult.

Maria's parents on the other hand do not have any knowledge of her practising Wicca. One of her younger sisters is the only one in the family that knows what Wicca is and that Maria practices it. The sister had noticed Maria's books about magic and occultism, pentacles and tarot cards. She started to ask Maria what she was doing and whether she had started to practice Satanism, so Maria told her about Wicca and her practice. When I asked her why she did not tell her parents, she answered that her parents would probably not understand, and even if she explained Wicca to them they would probably still believe that she was a Satanist.

Maria assumes and anticipates that her parents will jump to the wrong conclusions. This indicates that her cognitive boundaries between her and her parents can be seen here as creating stereotypes or at least that she expects the boundaries that will appear, between her and her parents, to create stereotypes.

Both Maria and Lisa have experienced few problems regarding their families. Another girl I met at the PPD, Anna, experienced stronger and more negative reactions from her mother. Her mother dragged her away from the park while she was attending PPD. Anna is 15 years old and she lives at home with her mother. She has a friend she practices together with and they have been practising together for about a year. A couple of weeks before PPD, Anna received a letter from a friend of hers about PPD, and they were going to meet there. Her mother, who knew nothing about what her daughter was doing or what PPD is, accused her of taking part in a sect, and wouldn't let her go and stay there with all those "crazy people" as she called them. Anna told me that her mother started to go to Church because of her, something she had never done before, and suddenly she claimed to be a Christian even though she has never practised previously. Anna tried to explain to her mother what Wicca is but the mother wouldn't listen. It all ended with her mother coming to the PPD and dragging her daughter away. The way Anna's mother reacted indicates that the boundaries are created from two sides. Her mother started going to Church and also became a devoted Catholic. When doing this she manifested the differences that exist between them and therefore reinforced the boundaries.

As we can see, the Witches keep their religion secret from their family because they are afraid they will be taken for Satanists. They choose not to explain their religion to their parents because they think the parents will not understand. In the case of Anna, the mother would clearly not try to understand, but in the case of Lisa her father understood or at least tried to understand. Lisa complained once about how her mother had thrown out her books about Wicca and magic when she did not hide them. This was before her parents knew about her religion.

Not all of my informants keep their religion secret from their parents or family. Both Marco and Clara had told their family about their religion. But even though their family and other friends know about their religion, they never talk about it or discuss it. Not discussing Wicca with other people also creates a distinction between them and the others, and thus sets them apart. They are different because there are certain topics that will be avoided in conversation; topics which are important for the practitioners. They under-communicate their identity as Witches in certain situations and over-communicate it in other. When under-communicating their identity as practitioners of Wicca, they share a sense of secrecy and knowledge that family and other friends do not take part in. Hence, they manifest the difference between themselves and the others and therefore reinforce and create boundaries.

By keeping their religion secret, they manifest a difference between themselves and their parents. Hence, keeping their religion secret will make them feel special. Even if they tell their parents and the parents understand, or try to understand, boundaries will be present because the other part does not take part in their symbols and religious aspect of their life. When assuming that the parents will not understand or not talk about the religion, they exclude them from the community because the parents are short of the necessary criterions for defined membership. It is a kind of knowledge that others do not take part in, and will therefore set the Witches apart from their families. They create in-groups and out-groups and therefore *communitas* can be created between the practitioners. When keeping it a secret they make the distinction more visible for themselves. Owing to these emphasized differences they have created a boundary. The

differences are expressed through fear of misunderstanding due to the other party's lack of information and knowledge. Conflicts arise and strengthen this separation between 'us' and 'the others'. It is the exclusion of others that creates 'us' and 'the others' and the construction of otherness is a part of creating a community. Their family is used as an opposition which they can use to think themselves into difference, as they do with the Church. So the family will play the role of the Church, but on a smaller scale. They are both oppositions that my informants are familiar with and are therefore easier to mark a distinct opposition against.

Keeping the religion secret from people other than friends and family is also important. One warm and humid summer day I met Maria, Lisa, Cinzia, Simona and a couple of other Witches at the train station, in order to plan a gathering. We decided to go to a small café with tables on the sidewalk, so we could have a cold drink while talking. Lisa had brought some books about Wicca that she had borrowed from Simona and she was now returning them. She put the books on the table, upside down so no one could see the covers. When the waiter came over with the drinks, they stopped talking and put their hands over the books so it would be impossible to see what the books were about.

Again they wanted to hide their religion, much because they were afraid of the negative reactions they expected to meet. Hiding it might also be a strategy to give an impression of being interesting. When hiding it from others and keeping it secret they will preserve the magic and the secrecy. They fear stigmatisation and therefore keep their religion a secret. On the other hand, the fact that they keep it a secret makes being a Witch more powerful.

Both Marco and Clara are older than the others and it is clear that a difference between those who are 15-16 and younger and those who are older exists. Most of my informants discovered and joined Wicca when they were 15-16 years old. As mentioned above in the background chapter, young Italians live at home much longer than other Europeans. Therefore the young need to find other ways to distinguish themselves from their families. They need to find other ways to create their identities. Fabiana, an 18 year old girl, told me that she started to practice Wicca partly to be different from her parents

who are Catholic. Since many of them discover and join Wicca while they are teenagers, it can seem that it takes the form of a teenage rebellion.

Situational identity

Regarding the internal conflicts examined in the previous chapter, I propose that the same process of boundary creation takes place there. First, the Witches set boundaries for their pagan identity, then for their Wiccan identity and then, through internal conflicts, they make boundaries for their own religious identity within Wicca. We can see it in the argument of Barth (1969) and how he sees ethnic boundaries; they are situational and manifested through social interaction. When my informants interact with non-pagans their identity as a pagan, or a Wiccan, becomes the most important aspect of their identity. When they interact with other pagans, their identity as a Wiccan becomes important, and when they interact with other Wiccans their personal religious identity becomes most important. This is manifested through the conflicts that arise through interaction, personal and social, as well as indirectly (books, computers etc.).

The dialectic between these various differences and oppositions is important in the creation of identity because the Witches are then forced to reflect on who they are.

It seems that the Witches construct their individual identity through internal differentiation and their collective identity through external differentiation. The dialectic between these two levels of construction, on the individual level and the collective level generates and creates their identities and their sense of self.

Their identity can thus be seen as concentric circles. Through social interaction various differences are emphasized depending on who they interact with, which in turn decides what aspects of their identity they see as important; Witch, pagan, or religious. When the other person or group is farther away from the person who displays his or her religious identity, the identity they display or the category they identify with, is wider. This is I believe, due to what they believe the other person will understand, what they

believe the other person is capable of understanding, and what the reaction is likely to be. The reaction they ascribe to others, however, is not always likely to be correct.

Through recognising the differences and thinking themselves into differences, the Witches reinforce the boundaries and their identity. When emphasizing differences and boundaries, they also reinforce a sense of belonging.

Summary

In this chapter I have given a description of how my informants draw boundaries and how they distinguish themselves from other social entities. The differences that create the boundaries are often emphasized by many of the Witches. Because many emphasize the same, the boundaries connect and not only separate. The boundaries connect the Witches as a group, and separate them from other social groups. However, since the boundaries are fluid and situational, where they are drawn depends on who they interact with.

Therefore, the boundaries will not necessarily entail a categorical distinction. Differences that are made important will vary according to who they interact with. One way the Witches distinguish themselves from other social groups is through the use of stereotypes. Knowledge of magic and knowledge of symbols and words, such as Witches and pentacles, becomes a criterion for membership. Those who are not part of this will thus not be a part of 'us'. What I have suggested in this chapter is that what the Witches do when they play with symbols, which leads others to use stereotypes and generate prejudice, is to create in-groups and out-groups. Since those who are a part of the community are in possession of knowledge that others do not have, they can be seen as liminal. This is also because they are secluded from rest of the society. This will in turn generate *communitas* and a feeling of belonging. By keeping their religion secret, and feeling discriminated and misunderstood, pagans and Witches create a common understanding of what it is to be pagan in Italian society when interacting with non-pagans or non-Witches. They feel different, and through the boundaries they create by emphasizing differences, they create a common solidarity among practitioners of Wicca and other pagan paths.

10. Concluding remarks

The main perspective of this thesis has been the dialectics and ambiguities of individuality/autonomy versus collectivity/community. In Italy the physical presence of a community of Witches is absent due to such things as secrecy, the small number of practitioners, and conflicts between them. My main concerns have been to explore how Italian Witches create community and the difficulties that emerge in that process. Due to their fragmented milieu with many solitary practitioners, and groups and covens that easily dissolve, Wiccans need a sense of community both to reinforce their identity as Witches and in order to feel a part of something greater. As I have demonstrated, recognition of others who are believed to practice Wicca, or paganism, is an important aspect which supports my assertion that Witches need a sense of community.

Bauman (2001) argues that in late modernity being part of a community is just as important as the individual freedom to choose. People will therefore employ different methods to create a community suitable for their individual needs. In modern western societies communities are not as tight-knit as they used to be: They are more loose-knit in order to allow for autonomy and individual freedom. According to Bauman (2001), separation from other individuals makes life unsatisfying. Giddens (1991), on the other hand, emphasizes separation from moral resources as the most prominent cause for an unsatisfying existence in late modernity. As shown in my material, both of these factors induce individuals search for something new; both for a sense of belonging and for stronger moral resources. The community created by Wiccans is a community which provides both.

As I have argued, one way to construct a community that takes care of both of these needs is by using symbols. The symbols are malleable and therefore people can attach their own meaning to them and still feel that they belong to something greater. The symbols make the practitioners believe that they believe the same. The community that

emerges among Witches and pagans in Italy is not only based on social interaction with each other, but on being able to identify with the shared symbols. Belonging, in a symbolic and cognitive sense, allows for individual freedom to choose within the frames of shared symbols, which create the community. The created community is symbolic and exists in its members minds.

There are no absolute external authorities in Wicca and this fact is often displayed as a critique of the Catholic faith and of the transcendent in Wicca. The Catholic Church has an authority, a dogma, and demands subordination by its followers. Wicca, in contrast, has no pronounced authority, no dogma, and no subordination. Every practitioner is responsible for his/her own life, and the practice of magic gives them a feeling of being in control. They retain their own free will, autonomy, and individuality. Because individuality is such an important aspect of Wicca, I suggest that this is why Wicca is chosen as an alternative to Catholicism in preference to other religious alternatives, such as charismatic and authoritative movements: Witches do not want external authorities to direct their lives. The Reformation started with the same critique of the Catholic Church. Wicca takes this one step further. Those practising Wicca are often dissatisfied with the way women are viewed by the Church. Extending this further, I suggest that being a Witch is also a response to Italian male-dominated culture, because in Wicca, the feminine aspect is as important as the masculine. Thus, the practice of Wicca can be a way to empower oneself as a woman.

What I have shown is that Wicca and the practice of magic can be seen as a strategy in creating meaning when traditional religious institutions, such as the Church, fail to do so, and are not able to satisfy basic communal needs or to offer a meaningful explanation of existence and the world in which we live. People are not satisfied just by belonging to a community: They want to belong to something meaningful. Often, they leave the Catholic Church because, in their opinion, it can no longer provide what they need for their individual spiritual development. The Catholic Church is seemingly not adapted to the modern world, because it does not offer enough room for individuality. Wicca, on the other hand, is a religion offering this and, in addition, is an alternative

explanatory model of the world in which they live. In other words, when the old explanatory models can no longer explain the world people must seek new models that make it possible for them to understand and interpret the world and create meaning. The worldview of Wicca teaches that every living creature is part of the same energy and that everyone takes part in the divine, since the divine is in everything: It is immanent and omnipresent. Consequently, everything is connected. The Wiccan worldview entails a sense of being part of something greater; nature, the divine, and the universe.

Most of my informants have higher education qualifications and possess substantial knowledge of the scientific worldview. They combine rationality and magic, which are not necessarily two opposites. Magic is another way to explain and understand existence. In the modern world, as defined by Giddens and Bauman, Wicca can be seen as a creative strategy to gain control of everyday life in this environment of constant transition. Explaining changes that take place is essential, and for my informants magic is an apt tool. Taking charge of one's own life in this way can be seen as a creative response to the insecurity, uncertainty, chaos, and ambivalence of late modernity, as explained by Giddens and Bauman.

Witches are individualists, and they pick and choose from the global supermarket as they wish. However, they all end up with the same stories, the same rituals, the same faith and the same philosophy. It can seem as if they reinforce and legitimise their religion by comparing themselves to others with the same worldview as themselves. According to Giddens (1990), the institutions that earlier tied people together are not of the same importance as they were before, and people are left to their own devices. Instead of institutions, I claim that symbols play the role of tying people together. This supports Bauman's (2001) notion that people in modernity create communities, albeit in a looser sense than the traditional one. The community is based on interest, and this community provides the safety that is needed in late modernity. Bauman claims that communities are based on social interaction. I argue that social interaction is, to a degree, not always necessary. The sense of belonging to a community can also be created through symbols.

However, the need for social interaction is reflected in all the attempts to create arenas for interaction both between pagans in general and Witches exclusively.

Although Wicca in Italy is a growing movement, the environment I have studied is a small environment consisting of relatively few informants. I will nevertheless argue that they are representative. The movement is similar in other countries and comparable studies of pagans and Witches have shown the same tendencies and movements as I have described in my thesis. Most of my informants are young and whether they will continue to practice Wicca when they become older is difficult to predict. However, I believe that those who have already practised for 5-10 years are likely to practice for many years more. Some of my informants are attempting to organise the Witches and pagans in Italy, and I think they will succeed in time because there are already a growing number of events compared to five years ago. The number of practitioners is increasing, and based on the development of Wicca both in Italy and other countries, I propose that Wicca will continue to grow in Italy.

My approach to Wicca in Italy has been one of many possible and interesting perspectives. Many aspects of Wicca in Italy are of current interest now that the basic research has been conducted. I have chosen to emphasize the creation of community, because this emerged as the most prominent question in my material. The number of practitioners is growing in Italy and the religion is maturing. To explore feminism and Wicca in Italy in greater depth with the Wiccan emphasis on feminine divine worship, the celebration of the feminine, and the contrasting view of women and sex compared to that of the Catholic Church would be an interesting approach. As the religion and its practitioners grow older and more mature, many interesting perspectives will open up.

The modern world, involving insecurity, uncertainty, a multiplicity of choices of life-styles and individuality, will bring about a need for individuals to create new ways and strategies to cope with the challenges forced on individuals by modernity. The individualistic project in Wicca will still remain strong, since this is a basic value, and both a sense of community and a focus on individuality are contained within the religion. Wicca is a philosophy and a way of living which makes the practitioners capable of

explaining and understanding the world. At the same time it is a community which provides a sense of belonging to something greater without straining personal and individual freedom, which is a claimed inertia in Wicca. I believe, based on this thesis, that religions emphasising individuality, and simultaneously providing a sense of belonging and explanatory models which people can use to make sense of their world, will emerge and grow as a response to the modern world.

Appendix 1

QUESTIONNAIRE ³²

- 1) Magic name:
- 2) Age:
- 3) Where do you live?
- 4) Sex: F M
- 5) For how long have you practiced Wicca? ☐ less than a year ☐ 1-2 years
☐ 2-3 years ☐ 3-5 ☐ more than 5
- 6) When and how did you discover Wicca?
- 7) How religious would you characterise your family to be? ☐ atheists
☐ non-practicing Catholics ☐ practicing Catholics ☐ other:
- 8) Work and/or education:
- 9) Civil status:
- 10) Do you usually practice alone or in a group?
☐ always alone ☐ always in a group ☐ depends
- 11) How much time do you dedicate and how often do you practice?
- 12) How do you practice? ☐ study ☐ meditation ☐ exercises ☐ ritual
☐ encounters with other Wiccans ☐ divination ☐ nature medicine
☐ other:
- 13) Who have you told that you are practicing Wicca? ☐ parents/siblings ☐ friends
☐ boyfriend/girlfriend ☐ husband/wife ☐ children
Any specifications:
- 14) Why did you choose to join Wicca?
- 15) What Wiccan traditions do you know? (Celtic, Dianic, Alexandrian, Gardenian, etc...)

³² translated from Italian to English

Do you follow any of these?

- 16) Has Wicca influenced your life? How?
- 17) Do you encounter many prejudices? From who and for what?
- 18) How do you relate to the historical witches and the inquisition?
- 19) Do you read a lot of book? How many? Which do you think is the best and why?
- 20) Have you seen any films about witches? If so, which?
- 21) What Internet sites do you prefer, and why?
- 22) How do you find Wicca in Italy in comparison to Wicca in other countries?
- 23) Where do you find material for practice? (Books, candles, other instruments, etc.)
- 24) How do you relate to other pagans than Wiccans?
- 25) Have you performed or do you perform rituals together with pagans who are not Wiccan? Why/why not?
- 26) Are you available for more questions on e-mail? ☐ YES ☐ NO

Appendix 2

Follow-up questions³³

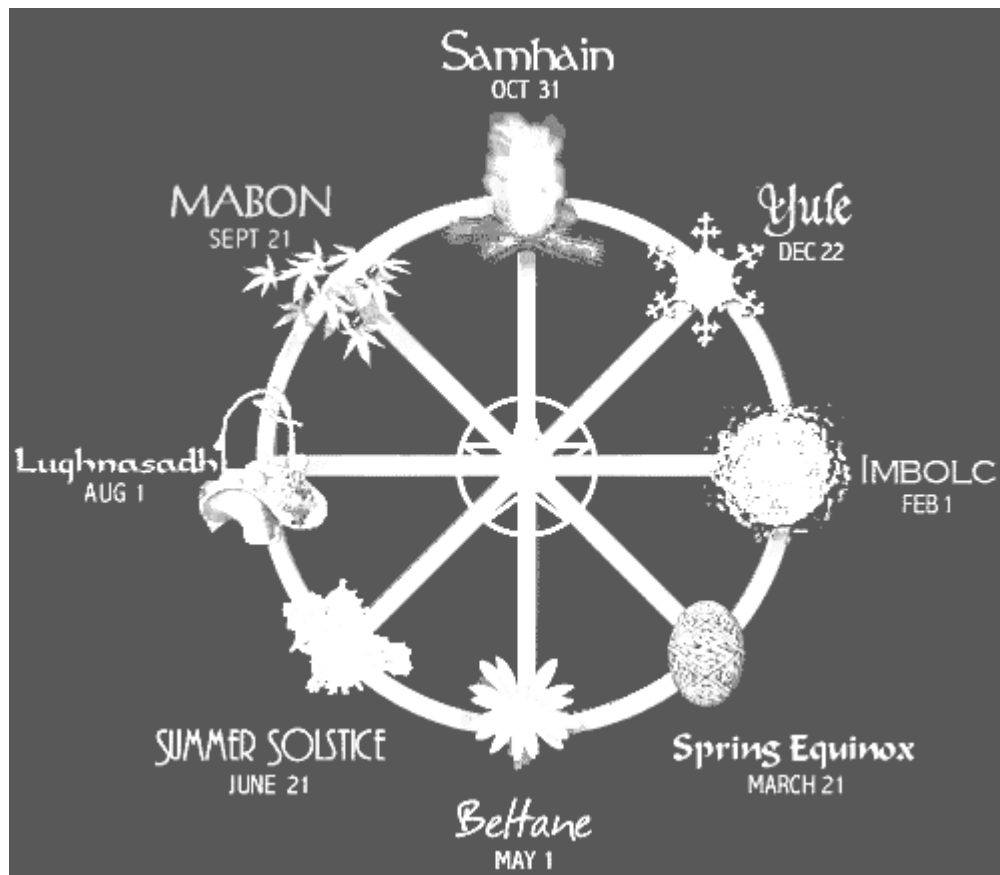
- 1) How did you choose your magical name?
- 2) Do you label yourself 'witch'?
- 3) How do you define the word or concept of 'witch'?
- 4) What aspects do you see as the most important in Wicca?
- 5) What does Wicca and being a Wiccan mean to you?
- 6) How do you perceive Christianity in Italy?
- 7) How do you experience the relations between women and men in Italy?
- 8) If you always practice alone, why?
- 9) If the world was perfect, what would it be like?

And for those who stated that they did not choose Wicca, but Wicca chose them:

³³ Translated from Italian to English

Appendix 3

The yearly cycle of sabbat rituals:



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